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BY
AUTHOR OF 'GUY LIVINGSTONE.'



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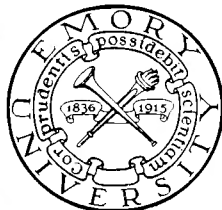
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OR,

KESTRELS AND FALCONS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

“GUY LIVINGSTONE,” “SWORD AND GOWN,”
“BREAKING A BUTTERFLY,”

ETC., ETC.

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SANS MERCI:

OR,

KESTRELS AND FALCONS.

CHAPTER I.

TORRCASTER.

THE expert, in matters architectural or ecclesiological, will easily point out to you some difference, marked and material, in the aspect of each and every one of English cathedral towns. But, to the uninitiated observer, a weary monotony of colouring seems to pervade them all. It is well with us, while we stand in the shadow of the huge western towers, or of the soaring minster-spire when the sun is low. Setting aside all reverence—the very sense of seclusion and severance from the buzzing world outside must needs be pleasant while it lasts; mind and body alike are content to rest for awhile in the midst of peace, that is not of our time.

It seems to me that the *Relligio Loci* may subsist wholly independently of creed; it may prevail in any spot, girdled by the grandeur of ancient stones, where multitudes have worshipped in singleness and sincerity of heart—however false or mistaken their faith—till it needs an antiquarian's eye to trace among ruins the outlines of a place of prayer. Only, to the building, whatsoever it may be, there must attach the grave dignity of age; there must be wealth of shade, not less than of light, within its precincts; eccentricities of architectural bad

taste are scarcely more fatal than the glitter and glare of novelty. Devotion has so little to do with the feeling of which I speak, that the sternest Puritan—an iconoclast in intent—might be subjected to it unconsciously, under the portico of St Peter's, whilst testifying fiercely in his heart against all the abominations of the Seven Hills, past, present, and to come; it might steal over a missionary to the Moslem, whilst resting in the shadow of an eastern mosque: I myself have felt it—leaning against the fragments of an altar whereon no fire has been laid since the death of Pan. But, most pious of all possible readers! I defy you to feel it, if you gaze till your eyes are dim on the last new conventicle, with walls scarlet as sin, and ceilings white as sepulchres.

Of course, such sensations are not necessary or universal (you have only to go into any famous foreign cathedral, when the long vacation army has gone forth, to be aware of this); but, I fancy, men often miss them—like other pleasant things in life—from being in too great a hurry to rest and ponder. Ponder! Why, Pascal himself could not be expected to meditate, with “Murray” in his hand—lost luggage on his heart—a wife querulous or curious at his side—and a cicerone droning into his ear discourse, in worse than an unknown tongue. Yet things are better, even now, than they were wont to be. Remonstrance has done much—ridicule more; let us hope that the roving Cockney will ere long constrain himself to walk with uncovered head where some others kneel and cross themselves; not to trample upon worshippers with whom he cannot sympathise; and not to prattle, an octave higher than the priest is singing. So, it is likely that even a very practical layman, with no local or professional interests to bind him to the spot, may issue from the archway of the Close, after the briefest tarrying there, in an unusually placid, if not pensive frame of mind; not repining—though perchance slightly inclined to regret—that fate should keep no canonry in store for his own declining years. In truth, it would be hard to find a more enviable asylum than those quiet mouldering walls—the natural home of all lichens and mosses and ivies—where the favoured church-veteran rests from his labours; with just

enough of duty in prospect to give dignity to his office, and salve the scruples of the conscientious sinecurist.

But before the stranger has left the cloisters a furlong behind him, be very sure his mood will change; the venerable quickly merges into the respectable; the dulness, which some reprobates maintain to be inseparable from respectability pure and simple, settles down on all surrounding objects, like a dense grey cloud. The citizens may be pleasant enough after their fashion; indeed, as a rule, they are much given to hospitality, and entertain aliens with no small kindness; they are no more to be blamed for being slightly lethargic than the dwellers in Sleepy Hollow; if there be a lack of enterprise and visible stagnation in trade, that, surely, is no affair of ours, who travel for no 'house' in particular, and whose interest in the Bankruptcy list is, at least, deferred to a future day. It is hard to say why, in such places, one should get bored so soon. Nevertheless, it is so. After a sojourn of ever so few week-day hours, we begin—not without some self-reproach—to feel as if we had been dining with a very old family friend, whose port and prosings are alike undeniable; and begin to be ungratefully ingenious in inventing excuses for speedy departure.

Now, Torrcaster—wherein this tale shall open—is not, socially speaking, a whit better or worse than its fellows. It has, of course, every now and then weeks of chartered festivity; when some society—choral or archæological—holds decorous revel there.

Then, in gloomy wainscoted parlours and passages, there is a ceaseless rustle of soft trailing raiment; a shimmer of jewels, and a glitter of eyes brighter yet; musical trills of laughter; and the light fall, rather imagined than heard, of dainty feet, as they sweep out to conquest or in to repose—the fair guests, whom the master of the quaint old house delights to honour. Then does clerical stock go up with a rush rapid and resistless; while the honest Plungers (Torrcaster is a cavalry head-quarters) are constrained to submit to temporary eclipse; being put on escort duty, only *faute de mieux*, or on the morning of the inevitable ball, where they hope to reassert themselves—if not to retaliate. Then does the good old family solicitor, born and bred within the cathedral shadow—a man usually slow and solemn, beyond the

telling, in gait, and speech, and manner ; ultra-canonical in his portly presence ; whose crown of white hair is venerable as a mitre—break into a fever-fit of activity, and work with head and feet, and voice and hands, like a machine endued for the nonce with forty manager-power ; as, in truth, there is great need ; since the reverend senior has to do all the work of two-score well-meaning but helpless committee-men. Then does the whole city break out into a general extravaganza of flags and flowers ; going in for pleasure with a perseverance that ignores fatigue and satiety. Fortunately for the constitutions of every one concerned, the curtain must drop on the Saturday at latest ; when visitors and residents go, each to his own place ; divided between satisfaction at a great success, and half-formed resolves never to undergo the like again.

But such festivals come not even biennially ; so that Torrecaster has ample time to recruit its energies in slumber. The placid city accepts her position very contentedly, and nods on, from year's end to year's end ; saving and except a dozen hours in each week, when she wakes up quite briskly from her doze, relapsing again before curfew-time on market-day.

This hebdomadal uprousing is common, of course, to all towns such as I have described ; if Torrecaster differs at all from others in the same class, it is in this, that the county element is, on these occasions, more prominently represented there. Not only do the great stock-farmers and corn-growers flock in to their 'Change ; but many never fail to be present whose interests are only remotely, if at all, bound up in agriculture. It has been a custom, time-honoured throughout the county far beyond the memory of man : Torrecaster market reckons on the countenance of all such Marlshire magnates as reside within reasonable distance, by road or rail ; and rarely reckons in vain. The lords of the soil acquiesce in the arrangement very readily ; if it entails any inconvenience, it is no worse than their fathers went through before them, or than their sons will undergo when they come into their heritage. So, there you will find the same cheery faces, old and young, to the fore—be the weather wet or dry : you never hear of a crack fixture of the M.H., nor of a favourite cover being shot, on the day devoted to Pales.

And the squirearchy has its reward. I am not aware that rents are lower, or land more profitable, in Marlshire than elsewhere ; but, of a surety, the farmers grumble less ; they support even the ravages of four-footed game with average equanimity,—one might almost say, magnanimously ; and burn with righteous indignation against poaching, well nigh as hotly as their landlords. With this comfortable state of things I do believe these meetings in the market-place have much to do.

Then yoke the mules of wingèd pace,
And, Phintis, climb the car with me :

we will drive into Torreaster with the rest of the world, and see what is a-doing this bright winter afternoon.

CHAPTER II.

SHADOWS IN THE CAMERA.

CHOOSE any coign of vantage you please—not hard to find, since the ground rises steeply on either side of the market-place—and wait and watch awhile.

At the first glance you will be struck, I think, with the *foreign* look of the whole scene. That strange jumble of architecture all around, where the builders seem to have had but one fixed idea—to make each house the strongest possible contrast to its neighbours ; those sharp gables, with beams showing through the masonry, lighted here and there by latticed casements ; those low beetle-browed pent-houses ; those clustering booths, each with its own canvas covering ;—surely, all these things we have seen a score of times in our wanderings beyond the seas, when some grand old *rath-häus* filled the back-ground, or the *carillon* of a Belfry was chiming noon.

But soon you begin to realise that you are actually and

thoroughly at home. There is not a trace of the brilliant medley of colours that would at once attract—if it did not fatigue—your eye, in a similar scene abroad. You might look in vain, here, for the quaint coifs, the cap-towers of stiffened muslin, the gay kerchiefs twined through shiny hair, the glitter of metallic ornament,—for any, in fine, of those characteristics of costume which the Continental peasantry have cherished for ages. Even in holiday time, the Marlshire dames and lasses scorn to enhance their native charms by the slightest sacrifice to the picturesque. In spite of contrasts of colouring in her attire, sometimes almost grotesque, she that was homely remains homely still.

Should any illusion as to your whereabouts linger in your fancy, it will vanish very quickly, as scraps of discourse come floating up from the Babel of tongues below. Babel, though, is a misnomer; for all are speaking not only the same language but the same dialect.

Now the Marlshire accent is by no means so marked in its peculiarities, as that of many other districts. After a moderately long sojourn—say a couple of years or so—in these parts, one not in the country born will be able to converse easily enough with a native of low degree; yet it is as unmistakeable as any *patois* under the sun.

Years ago—shooting in French Flanders—I came suddenly upon a railway bridge then in course of construction; and, being hot and weary, sate down in a shady nook to rest. There was a great clatter of tongues overhead, amongst which perhaps the Irish predominated (the contractor himself was an Emerald, and patriotic as far as the main chance would allow). Something had evidently gone wrong. I daresay about three-score voices might have been going together, best pace; yet amongst them all, I recognised that one familiar accent—long-drawn, deliberate, unmusical as ever. Nevertheless, it brought back some very pleasant memories; so pleasant, that incontinently I arose, and, to his great surprise and jubilation, bestowed on the honest Marlshire man a not illiberal *trinkgeld*, for lang-syne's sake.

The market-place is not very crowded now; for the bustle of serious business was over before noon. That throng that circulates to and fro is made up chiefly of idlers, and of the domestic

commission-agents who have not yet completed their purchases ; nor is it dense enough to prevent you distinguishing individual figures easily.

One, immediately beneath us, is worth noting, were it only for the peculiarities of its attire. The broad-leafed low-crowned hat, long-skirted coat, and drab nether-clothing, were familiar to our forefathers ; but to us, in this century born, they have much of the effect of masquerade. There is a good deal of character in the rugged features ; and the massive head, framed in long unkempt hair—rich brown once, but sun-bleached and weather-stained now, even where it is not thickly flecked with grey—forms a fitting capital to the square Doric column, so solidly set on its sturdy pedestals. No one can look at Harold Ethelstone without thinking of his own pollard oaks.

In spite of all this, and an exceeding uncouthness of voice and manner, you are not much surprised when you hear that no English house, from Severn to Tweed, can boast of purer blood than flows in that old man's veins. Through good and evil fortune, through the chances and changes of dynasties, the Ethelstones of Holt have held and hold a large portion of lands that they tilled under the Heptarchy ; and—what is stranger still—with hardly a break in their direct lineage.

Walking through the portrait-gallery of any ancient family—you will remark, that certain peculiarities of feature and expression reproduce themselves, almost exactly, after the lapse of many generations. Perhaps there are moral, no less than physical, cycles. If it be so, surely the spirit of some ancestor must have animated the rough-hewn carcase of Harold Ethelstone. In truth, his manner of life very much resembles that of a Thane. He is out amongst his flocks and herds, or riding through his shadowy woods, soon after sunrise ; he sits down soon after noon to a patriarchal meal of mighty joints, washed down by floods of heavy Marlishire ale, to which any comer, on whatsoever errand, or whatsoever degree, is welcome ; and he goes to his rest soon after curfew. Much given to field sports in his youth, he had seldom shot and never hunted of late years ; for his whole soul is wrapped up in agriculture, of which he is a shining light, albeit somewhat old-fashioned in his prejudices. Be the season foul or

fair, old Harold grumbles consistently ; but they say that with wheat even at 40s. the books of the great home-farm have shown a steady profit-balance at the year's end.

While good dame Eleanor lived, there was ever a regular interchange of hospitalities between Holt and the other great houses of the county, to which Squire Harold submitted with a sufficiently ill grace ; but since her death, many years ago, he has grown more and more solitary, not to say boorish, in his habits ; till now his intercourse with those of his own degree is chiefly confined to greetings in the market-place, or a passing nod on the road. He is much more at home with the farmers, who treat him with scarcely more deference than one of their own order : his own tenants are the only exceptions to this rule ; for Cedric or Hereward did not rule their *ceorls* more absolutely than does the squire his dependents. He is a kind landlord enough ; never unjust or tyrannical ; and obedience may spring not less from love than fear ; but—be his behests for good or evil—there never was man born on his broad lands that twice said Harold Ethelstone nay.

The eldest of six stalwart sons married a lady of high degree, and lives on another of the family estates in a far-off county. He seldom comes to Holt. Albeit there is no feud betwixt them, the old man ever frets and fumes in presence of his first-born ; he is so fond of his acres that it chafes him to look on the face of their future lord : it is not the revenues of Holt—for he is open-handed to prodigality with his children—but the tillage of all those fair swaths, and the pruning of those flourishing woodlands, that Harold half begrudges his heir.

A strong contrast with the squire is the man with whom he is now conversing earnestly—so earnestly, indeed, that a fierce light flashes, ever and anon, out of his broad blue eyes, as he emphasises his words with much energy of gesture. A very dapper and debonair little person—a genial smile always hovering about his handsome mouth—whiskers almost too carefully curled for unassisted nature—dressed in the perfection of quiet sporting taste : indeed, that riding-coat is worthy of Saville Row ; the drab cords fit like an easy glove ; and the brilliant polish of the butcher-boots gleams through the thick mud-flecks that tell of long and fast horse-travel.

That is Mr Chalkley, of Northam Hall, owner, in fee-simple, of 2000 acres of the best land in Marlshire, and tenant-farmer of as many more. He seldom misses a meet of the M. H., riding undeniable cattle, of whose necks he is not sparing; his wife's ponies are almost as pretty, in their way, as their fair mistress—no small word: looking to the quality of the liquor (to say nothing of the liberality of its dispersal, wherein there is no comparison at all), I would liever dine with him any day than with his landlord,—though the last-named banquets under a roof groined, gilt, and armorially panelled, lofty enough for the Earl and K. G. that he is; while the ivy has not so far to climb before it tops the grey gables of jolly old Northam Hall.

Yet is Arthur Chalkley very wise in his generation. Though things have gone prosperously with his family for many years, so that its importance has been surely, and not slowly, waxing; he writes himself down yeoman, as did his fathers before him; and never—with his good-will—will his son struggle into squirearchy. He finds time for work, be sure, as well as play; or his name would not stand where it does in agricultural chronicles. Not only from distant English and Scottish districts, but from far beyond the four seas, do strangers come, to be initiated in the wonders wrought in high farming by the scientific development of drainage, and sewage, and steam. Ay, and—with all his pleasant smile and genial careless manner—there are few in Marlshire keener at a bargain than *ce cher Chocklee*, as his foreign admirers call him. In that one that he is now driving with Squire Ethelstone, it would be hard to say which will get the best of it; about even betting, I think; with, perhaps, the old one for choice.

You would guess at once that the occupants of yonder sober brown barouche, drawn close up to the pavement a few yards further on, are people of weight and importance. So, indeed, they are. Sir Pierce Peverell represents the county; and his wife would fain rule it. Many years ago she signed her own commission as Lady Lieutenant; and since then, under her tyranny, there have been many malcontents—few rebels. The dames of higher degree, who might have well disputed the supremacy, have always been too idle, or too timid, for serious rivalry.

Taking the baronet first : you see a man rather advanced in years, with small white whiskers hardly trenching on broad sanguine cheeks ; glassy grey eyes, very prominent and lustreless ; with no particular expression on his face, save lethargic good-nature. In his present posture, you hardly realize his great stature and lankiness of limb ; but when erect, his huge head, overlapping a narrow carcase, and neck unnaturally prolonged, looks as if it were set on a spear. When you hear that Sir Pierce Peverell has sate amongst our legislators for more than a quarter of a century, you are irresistibly reminded of Oxenstiern's hackneyed truism—"See, with how little wisdom this world is governed." Of a truth, the poor baronet is so exceeding dull of comprehension and slow of reasoning, that he finds life anything but play-work : yet he plods through his daily round of duties very conscientiously ; and is generally to be found at his proper posts—striving hard to look as if he understood the business in hand, and ever ready to record an honest, if a silent, vote.

Of a very different stamp is the dame who reclines at Sir Pierce's side. There are traces of beauty still in the gloomy face ; though, with that dead-white complexion and dull black hair, it must always have been of the funereal order ; but the first thought that strikes you is—How could that woman have been wooed or won ? Surely, no whisper of endearment can ever have escaped those thin cast-iron lips, that, even when they smile, seem to be performing a set, distasteful ceremony ; far less could they have moulded themselves to meet or return a kiss : the stiff straight lashes that shade, without softening, her cold eyes can never have been wet with tender tears.

After one passing glance, you feel disposed to credit all the tales that are abroad about her ladyship's temper. It was born with her, no doubt ; for the ancient North-country family from which she sprang has long been evilly notorious for the savage outbreaks of passion which have brought not a few of its members to a violent end. In old times, men were wont to say, that the sun never went down on a Churton's wrath but there was sure to be bloodshed before morning ; and not a very remote ancestor of Lady Peverell's, with the certainty of the scaffold before him, went on straight to his revenge.

When Sir Pierce brought his bride home, her fame had preceded her : there was much speculation, and not a little wagering as to which would take and keep the lead ; the odds being heavily in the grey mare's favour. Truly, at first, the race seemed all one way ; her ladyship went off as if she never meant to be caught ; but she had to deal with a stubborn, if not a swift, opponent, who fairly collared her at last, and ran the longest. Putting metaphor aside—she did lead Sir Pierce a terrible life for some three years after their marriage ; then the domestic broils appeared to cease. If common report is to be believed, peace sprang out of the bosom of war—in this wise.

On a certain memorable occasion, the lady was irritated by Sir Pierce's stolid indifference into forgetfulness of both self-respect and self-command ; it is possible that an accidental side-view of the vast red vacuous face was an irresistible temptation ; be this as it may, the story goes that she suddenly raised her hand—no light or frail one—and smote her liege lord on the cheek, a good, hearty, ringing blow, that made the ears of those who only heard of it to tingle. The baronet was staggered, but not perceptibly startled or surprised : he paused a little, ruminating silently, as was his wont, before any active movement whatsoever : then he laid an iron grasp on either shoulder of his assailant, and shook and swayed her to and fro till she grew faint and breathless, and could scarcely stagger to her sofa, to crouch there, shivering and moaning. And, all the while, the heavy benevolence of his own countenance never changed a whit. This very unromantic episode is to be taken with several grains of salt ; inasmuch as it rests on the unsupported testimony of a discharged waiting-woman, who professed to have assisted at it through the half-opened door of a neighbouring chamber ; but it had no gross elements of improbability, and has ever been currently believed throughout the country-side. Certain it is, that, from that particular epoch, Sir Pierce has been allowed to 'gang his ain gate' without active molestation, and even to exercise paramount authority over all important movements of his household.

But, with this half-submission to her husband, Lady Peverell's scanty power of conciliation and forbearance seems to have been exhausted : with all the rest of the world she preserves, at best,

an armed neutrality. She is fond, and proud, too, in her own cold way, of her son—a very type of herself in feature and temper; but the pair are always snarling and snapping at each other in a truly wolfish fashion; while her daughter (there are only two children), who is unfortunately unattractive in her appearance, has such a time of it at home as falls to the lot, I hope, of few plain, marriageable maidens. It is well for Janet Peverell that she was born with an excellent constitution, a brave, hopeful heart, and a keen eye for silver linings in clouds. As it is, she seems to have her fair share of life's sunshine. Were it not for her mother's taunts, I doubt if she would remark the tardiness of wooers or occasional absence of partners; nor even thus is she inclined to repine. She only shakes her comical little head, and says, with her own honest laugh, "Never mind, mamma: my turn will come soon." To which let all her many friends say Amen, cordially.

That small wizened man, with the restless, twinkling eyes and bird-like face—he always seems to *peck* while he is speaking—who leans over the barouche door, talking eagerly to Sir Pierce Peverell, is the Reverend Randal Sherrington, the great oracle of Marlshire; whom the natives point out with pride to all new-comers as a very prodigy of eloquence and learning. Indeed, there is no subject under heaven that he will not discuss, with bewildering, if not convincing, fluency. One curious in statistics once took the trouble to note down the heads of our parson's discourse, for the space of twenty minutes or so. The foreign policy of the Ministry—the costumes at the last county ball—the merits of a new top-dressing for heavy land—the decipherment of Runic inscriptions—the orthodoxy of a certain prelatial pamphlet—the best way to beat a noted cover for cocks—on each and everyone of these topics did he deliver oracular judgment, to the perfect satisfaction of himself and his audience. It is a quarter-session question that he has mooted with the baronet; if you ever watched the action of a boring tool on very tough limestone, it will give you some idea of the process whereby the Reverend Randal is striving to drive his own view of the case into the porches of the other's sluggish brain.

Further on yet, close to the arched entrance to the chief inn

of Torrcaster, you see a little knot of loungers ; in the midst of whom stands a burly, middle-aged man, taller by half a head than any of his companions. That is Mr Braybroke, of the Grange—"Frank" to his cronies—"The Squire" to all the rest of the world down here. He holds his precedence rather by virtue of office than of position ; for there are half a dozen others, of like degree, of larger territory, and more ancient name (indeed, though they have taken root so kindly in the county, the Braybrokes were *novi homines* to the grandsires of many now living). But the present owner of the Grange has borne on his own broad shoulders all the management, and half the cost, of the Marlshire hounds since he came into his inheritance. He has had a difficult and delicate game to play ; some of the Marlshire magnates are unusually keen in shooting rivalry, and can hardly comprehend the co-existence of pheasants and foxes. But his tact, and perseverance, and good humour, have been too much for the most crabbed of the game-preserving sceptics : his hounds are never stopped whilst running, now, let them head whithersoever they will : and vulpecide is a crime only darkly hinted at, even by keepers in conclave.

Time was when Frank Braybroke's bluff, handsome face—very like some portraits of our Eighth Henry—and bright brown eyes, lingered long in certain womanly memories, and may have caused more heartaches than ever he wist of ; but the boldest of matrimonial speculators have long ceased to conspire against his peaceful bachelorhood. There is little of the saint, much less of the misogynist, about the burly Squire. Whispers—italicised with nods and winks of deeper meaning than words—have been afloat not unfrequently anent his frolics in foreign parts ; but—whatever may have been his youthful frailties—The Squire has never ventured 'to dash violently against the throne' of Social Justice. The most rigid upholder of conventionalities, need have found no stumbling-block in such mild misdoings as his county was bound to be cognisant of. He is steady enough now, even the scandal-mongers will affirm—and with reason good ; for there are broad streaks of silver in his thick chestnut curls, and he rides three good stone heavier than when he wound his first blast on the master's horn. He knows every gate and gap in the country,

as well as a hare does her favourite meuse ; so that he can always keep within a reasonable distance of his hounds ; but he owns to shirking stiff timber and blind ditches, and looks rather more for shoulders than for jumping-power in his weight-carriers.

There is a knowing smile on the Squire's lip just now, as he watches the slow approach of another Marlshire celebrity, who is hobbling up, evidently with an eye to business. The new comer is no other than Tony Cannell, whose name is a very household word amongst all such as delight in horse-flesh.

An elderly man of monstrous obesity—unhealthily pale and utterly beardless—whose vast, pendulous cheeks seem to sway hither and thither with every motion of his ponderous limbs—yet the face is not exactly repulsive. There is a merry gleam in the small deep-set eyes, and a humorous expression about the mobile lips, that remind you at once of a certain famous Liberator. Think of such a flesh-mountain as that being—‘a jockey well versed in numbers’ (*vide* Bonnycastle, *passim*). One might as easily fancy dear John Falstaffe a captain of light cavalry. Of a truth, it is many years since Tony has aspired to witch the world with any feats of activity whatsoever ; occasionally, with many grunts, and groans, and maledictions, he heaves himself into the saddle of a stolid cob very much of his own build ; but, as a rule, he risks his precious carcase in nothing more perilous than a capacious, well-cushioned gig, with a fast trotter in the shafts. But he is a wonderful judge of horse-flesh : those little twinkling eyes of his will pick out every good and bad point, from crest to fetlock, almost mechanically ; whether the animal be made up for sale, stale from hard work, or rough from the straw-yard. Once having heard Tony over a deal—you cease to marvel at his professional celebrity. Since the days of Ulysses, surely no mortal tongue ever moved on such well-oiled hinges : in spite of ghastly faults in grammar, and an intense vulgarity of manner and tone, you would stand entranced at the easy flow of his magnificent mendacity, as you would listen to the gurgling of a swift deep river. The brief funeral oration which another less famous couper pronounced over his own first-born, might well be spoken over Tony's grave.

“ Bless him ! There never was so sweet a liar ! ”

Hark to him now, as he sidles up to Frank Braybroke, and beckons him a little aside from the rest, with a certain mystery in his manner.

"Mornin,' Squire. I was half afraid I 'shouldn't find you; they said you was going out early. Might I ask you to drive round by my place? I would'nt trouble you for nothin,' you know; but there's a picter up there as *is* worth lookin' at; one of your own sort, if ever I see one, and I've known your stamp these twenty years. Sixteen hands, dark chesnut—your colour again, Squire; legs as flat as my hand and clean as a foal's; as to weight—why, I wish I durst ride over a country,—he'd carry *me* as safe and as easy as a chair. All this week, they've been comin' to me with money in their hands and tears in their eyes; and 'Tony,' says they, 'that horse I must have whether or no.' 'But, excuse me,' I says; 'I won't pull him out for ne'er a one of ye, till The Squire has looked him over.'"

The orator is compelled to halt here, from lack not of matter but of breath, and Braybroke's deep, mellow laugh breaks in.

"Sounds tempting, Tony, certainly; and your thoughtfulness for me is really touching. But I'm afraid I haven't a guinea to part with, nor a tear to shed. We're very full at home, just now, and I've had an extra pull or two lately; I can't afford such luxuries as you're talking of. By the bye, how did he come to you, if it's not a delicate question?"

A fat smile of contentment overspreads the dealer's vast visage, as oil diffuses itself over placid water; he knows, right well, that the customer who stops to parley is already within his meshes.

"Lor' bless you, Squire! you may ask what you like, and welcome. I ain't got no secrets from you. I stopped at Blechynden last week for the second day's racin': there I met young Dick Wylder,—you remember him; his mare ran up for our Hunters' Stakes last year;—he had this horse with him, but he didn't mean sellin'; if he hadn't been so terrible hard hit, we shouldn't have made a deal; I had to shake the notes at him, I can tell you. He rides heavier than you, Squire; and don't stick at no price for his cattle. But he's pretty well at the end of his tether now, they say; tho' it aint long since he come into a very

tidy fortune. It's a sad case ; but what can you expect, when a man takes to drinkin', and gamblin', and gay ladies ? ”

The old reprobate wags his ponderous head, solemnly and sorrowfully ; just as if he were not himself the most notorious of evil livers—feeding with half his hard-gotten gains the Ring, the hellites, and the venal Venus. There is more of real sympathy in the Squire's face, though the laugh is still in his eye.

“ Indeed ! I'm right sorry to hear that : though I scarcely know Wylder to speak to. I daresay his ruin began with his buying horses he had no occasion for. Well, Tony, I'll look round and see Perfection, or whatever his name is ; but don't expect me to deal. I give you fair warning, mind.”

Notwithstanding which sage self-denial I should like to lay a share of odds on the paragon in question finding his way to the Grange stables ; and he may turn out a very honest, useful animal after all. For Tony Cannell is not a whit more of a Barabbas than many of his fellows : there is more of a natural racy humour than of deliberate dishonesty at the bottom of his tremendous mendacity ; at all events, were he looking out for plunder he would scarcely pick his victim from the ranks of the Marlshire squirearchy.

And now—*Place aux dames*,—

A measure of prudence not less than of courtesy, as Lady Laura Brancepeth's phaëton swept down the steep decline of North Street, and round the corner of the Town Hall, at a liberal half-speed ; while all obstacles seem to melt miraculously away, before the happy audacity of the fair charioteer. Her ladyship's favourite colours are black and scarlet ; and they are as well known, by this time, as those of the most popular turfite. You see she mounts them everywhere : in the rosettes under the ears of those high-stepping browns, that she persists in calling ponies, though they stand three inches over any galloway standard known ; in the glossy bear's-skin, with its gorgeous lining, that covers her below the waist so comfortably ; in the knowing turban-hat wherein gleams a feather like a fire-flaught ; last, not least, in her full firm lips and bold bright eyes.

She is the leader of a very fast set in town ; and, when its members rally round their Reine Gaillarde—as is their wont at

certain festive seasons—they scandalise the sober neighbourhood not a little with their pranks and vagaries. Lady Laura's admirers—most of whom, it must be owned, belong to the sterner sex—uphold her to be as innocent of wrong intent as the bitterest of prudish matrons; even her enemies, while they keep up a perfect pebble-storm of small insinuations, can find no stone weighty enough to damage seriously her fair fame. She says herself,—“ If Mr Brancepeth don't mind, it is no business of anybody else's; ” and, so, goes on her reckless way rejoicing; meeting friend or foe with the same gay freedom—ever prodigal of her smiles and chary of her sighs. She knows that she finds little favour in the Dean of Torrecaster's scowling eyes, who is somewhat too pointed in his frequent allusion to Moabitish women; yet, when the arch Levite passes by on the other side, she returns his icy salute gracefully and carelessly; just as if she were acknowledging the reverence of some hard-riding farmer—her humble admirer and sworn liegeman.

The châtelaines of Peverell Park and Brancepeth Castle meet often; always with a show of outward courtesy; but at the heart of the elder dame there is war to the knife, that she sometimes finds it hard to dissemble. True, the Lady Laura has never troubled herself to dispute the other's implied supremacy in county matters; but Lady Peverell thanks her not for a forbearance that springs evidently rather from indolence or indifference, than from reverence or fear. She hates La Reine Gaillarde for her haughty beauty; for her popularity amongst men, old and young, high and low; for the merry mischief gleaming in her great black eyes; most of all, for the sharp mocking tongue, that spares not even her own awful name. She would give ten years of life, to be able—ay, were it only in thought—to set her foot on the neck that has never once bowed itself before her, and to see her enemy's honour laid in the dust.

All this, too, Lady Laura knows; yet it chafes her not one whit, neither does she deign to requite hate with hate. Marlshire gossips say, that a battle-royal must eventually come off; and should the interests or fancies of these two ever clash seriously, there will doubtless be a very pretty quarrel. But meanwhile, there are no petty bickerings. When the Censoreess is

unusually frigid or disagreeable Lady Laura contents herself with making a comic *moue*, and studies fresh points for future mimicry. They are fond of boudoir theatricals at Brancepeth Castle; and the "make up" of its mistress, as Lady Peverell—with the aid of much pearl-powder, burnt cork, and a head-dress of the severest Doric order—is simply perfect.

One more *croquis* before we close this bundle of sketches. Mark that dainty dame, tripping delicately over the pavement to her pony-carriage, round which are lounging three or four cavaliers, evidently soldiers in mufti. Nothing can be more subdued than the whole tone of her attire, in which the soberest shades blend so harmoniously; that tiny bonnet is a real triumph of art concealing art; you would swear it was quite an accident when, ever and anon, a flutter of the looped-up dress reveals the neatest ankle in Marshire, cased in hosen matching the striped kirtle of violet and grey. Very quiet and composed, too, is the pale, demure little face, in which there is no remarkable beauty, save a pair of large liquid eyes, of a colour ever changing. When she speaks there is a plaintiveness in her low, sweet voice, as if she sought for sympathy in some secret sorrow.

Yet, O my friend, I bid you beware. Blanche Ellerslie has wrought as much mischief in her time as any Vivien of them all, and is still insatiate of conquest. Under the spell of her waving hands have bowed themselves, ere this, heads as grey—if not as wise—as Merlin. Amongst her victims the military element is very conspicuous; indeed the Service has suffered from her fascinations since Blanche's girlhood; for her father was a general of high repute, and her late husband died in his harness, four years ago, colonel of a heavy-dragoon regiment. In how many albums, I wonder does her *mignonne* figure hold the chiefest place; and on how many dreary barrack-rooms does she beam (photographically) with her soft treacherous eyes? Mrs Ellerslie finds it not inconvenient, occasionally, to bring out a special 'scuffer'—as—"on papa's staff for years," or—"one of poor Horace's brother officers." The assertion cannot easily be controverted; for even scandal-mongers don't carry old army-lists about their persons; and it invests the whole proceeding with a halo of duteous piety. Be it observed, that the fair widow is never more dan-

gerous than when she supposes herself to be flirting *in memoriam*.

Why she should have refused several eligible offers since she doffed her weeds, would not be easy to say. It cannot be that matrimonial experiences deter her; for that the yoke never galled her slender neck is most certain.

Colonel Ellerslie was not a very wise or just man, but he had sense enough to believe in honesty at the bottom of his pretty pet's coquetties; ill it would have fared with any Iago that had dared to breathe a doubt on her honour. Rigid, even to tyranny, in matters of discipline—he was the most submissive of domestic slaves. It was good to see how his manner changed, as he clanked in over his own threshold after a field-day—how the choleric martinet became, instantly, the courteous host—how heartily he would welcome Blanche's prime favourite for the nonce; ay, though it were the especial subaltern into whom, but an hour ago, he had been pouring canister-volleys of malediction; for (as his men were wont to say, half-admiringly) "he was a fine free swearer." While they lived together, time, and trouble, and cost were as nought, in the Colonel's eyes, where any caprice of his wife was to be gratified; and when he lay a-dying, it is to be feared, he thought far more anxiously about her future than his own. It may be that the very fact of her having been so thoroughly spoiled and indulged, made the wilful little widow somewhat cautious; it was, indeed, by no means likely she would repeat her luck in a second venture. She was wealthy enough to be able to satisfy all her not immoderate fancies; for, not long before he died, Colonel Ellerslie had inherited a very pretty estate, a few miles from Torrcaster; this he bequeathed, with all his other worldly chattels, to Blanche, unfettered by the shadow of a condition. With all his faults he was too unselfish to nourish those posthumous jealousies that better men, perhaps, have not been ashamed to indulge in. Had he known that Blanche would wed again before the year's end, he would never have begrudged it, if only he had been assured that her fair fame and future happiness were quite safe.

"Don't fret, darling."

These were the last intelligible words that stole, in a hoarse

whisper, from under the huge grizzled moustaches, just before the stern eyes set themselves for ever and aye.

Perhaps Blanche was really more grateful to her husband, and more careful of his memory, than the world gives her credit for. At any rate she has been more than difficult in her choice of a successor. Still young, and fair enough to mar the chances of many marriageable maidens (the Marlshire *chaperons* have long ago put the blackest cross against her name)—still prone to flirtation, and full of perilous fascination as ever—she yet, to all outward appearance, remains heart-whole and scatheless ; warring under her own *guidon*, and for her own hand—a sworn Free Companion.

If there be any more notabilities abroad in Torrcaster market-place to-day, they must wait for a more convenient season to be presented to you. It is full time that we set forward, seriously, with our tale.

CHAPTER III.

THROUGH THE TWILIGHT.

OF the many inns in which Torrcaster rejoices, the Nag's Head is by no means the most eminent. Very modest it is in outward pretensions ; standing in a by-street rather remote from the market-place, you might pass its doors a dozen times without ever glancing up at the dusky sign—battered, weather-beaten, hard to decipher as any old knightly shield ; yet it is much affected by many gentles and yeomen of Marlshire. Divers give divers reasons for favouring this especial hostelry : the real one, I believe, is to be found in the popularity of its barmaid.

Let it not for an instant be supposed, that the attractions of this excellent person are, at all, of the flaunting or meretricious order. Lucy Denison must always have been very pleasant and comely to look upon, but never a beauty ; and she is well-

stricken in years, though she carries them so lightly. Even in early youth, they say, she was very sober in her attire; and, of late, she makes few concessions to the fashions of an innovating age. Perhaps this may have something to do with the acknowledged fact of her never looking any older; for, of a truth, Time seems to have no hold on that hardy perennial. If the bloom faded long ago from the quiet face, there is, at least, never a wrinkle there, and the smooth dark hair has not grown scanty or dull. The Nag's Head has changed landlords more than once in her time; but none were bold enough to dream of ousting Miss Denison from office. Through all successions of dynasty she abides in her own place—absolutely supreme over her nominal superiors—as immoveable, and far more honoured than the famous Vicar of Bray.

The familiars of the Nag's Head treat Lucy with this much of deference—that they are as careful in her presence to abstain from rude or blasphemous talk, as they would be before their own mothers and sisters; yet is the ancient barmaid by no means averse to mild and seemly banter; which she parries and returns, with the calm self-possession of one who has dealt with the cunning tongue-fencers of two generations. It is in her pleasant, kindly manner, and invincible good temper, added to an absolute incapacity of speaking ill of any living creature, that Lucy's chief attractions lie. Not only is she a favourite with the male frequenters of Torrcaster market; but the wives and daughters, even of the chief of these, sometimes do not disdain to rest themselves awhile in her inner sanctum, and will chat with her concerning county news and the like, just as freely as they would with any intimate friend.

It was about the busiest hour at the Nag's Head of all the day; for the winter afternoon was closing in fast. Such prudent wayfarers as cared not for a darkling ride, were crowding in for their parcels and their stirrup-cups. The narrow passage was almost impassable at times; and Lucy's practised hands and eyes and ears were all doing double duty. On such occasions, save to a very few privileged intruders, the bar was always jealously closed.

Such a one must have been that stout, elderly farmer—sitting

in a cosy arm-chair near the door of that inner sanctum, through which no male foot ever passed—unfolding the London paper that had just arrived, with a leisurely air of anticipated enjoyment, quite heedless of the bustle without.

In truth, Mr Lester has something more than the rights of very old acquaintanceship to presume upon. Many years ago he asked Lucy Denison if she cared to take the keeping of his heart. It puzzled many at the time—perhaps it has puzzled herself once or twice since—to say why she refused the wealthy yeoman's offer. But refuse it she did; kindly and gratefully. Stout John Lester was bitterly disappointed, and not a little chafed, at first; but he took the blow manfully, just as he would have done any bodily pain; he was too busy to indulge in moping, and too good-hearted to nourish malice; so the two were soon as true friends again as ever. Indeed, Lucy has occasionally been heard to banter her ancient lover on his determined bachelorhood; suggesting certain eligible maids or widows for his consideration; but—with never a tinge of romance in either of their honest natures—they know, right well, that both are vowed to celibacy, not less than any monk or nun.

Suddenly Miss Denison's quick roving glance lighted on a single face, in the crowded passage, and rested there; chiefly because that face wore an anxious, troubled expression, that seemed strange to her—knowing the man. She beckoned to him, opening, at the same time, the half-door of the bar.

There was nothing very striking in the new-comer's exterior. A figure something below middle-height, rather strongly than gracefully built—features the reverse of statuesque, yet not ignoble or repellant in their irregularity—clear grey eyes, not apt to flash variably, but meeting friend or foe with the same steady tranquil light, hair closely cropped, and bushy whiskers closely trimmed, both of the same deep chestnut-red—a complexion whose original fairness, long exposure to wind and sun could not quite subdue: this, to all whom it may concern, is the *signalement* of one known to all Marlshire, high and low, as “Tom Seyton of Warleigh.”

“You want something, I'm sure, sir,” the bar-maid said. “Is it anything I can do for you?”

It was a good point in Seyton's face, that it always lighted up while he was speaking; and strangers were apt to be favourably impressed by the first sound of his voice—it had the round jovial ring of one often exercised in the open air

"Many thanks, Miss Lucy: it is a shame to disturb you now. Do you think you could coax the paper out of Lester's hands for three minutes? There's news in it—good or bad—that I must carry home with me: and I ought to have started half-an-hour ago."

"I thought it was something more serious," Miss Denison answered, with a light laugh. "Of course you can have the paper, Mr Seyton. Mr Lester will have plenty of time to finish it; indeed he's plenty of time for everything—except business. Would you believe it? He's been loitering about here the whole morning."

The old yeoman lifted his head with a look of comic penitence on his broad face, and held out the paper before he spoke.

"Dont'ee be so hard on a man, Miss Lucy. Muster Seyton knows I mostly work before I play; and there's not a many earlier in market-hall than me. They took all the beasts I had to sell without much chaffering, I can tell'ee: that aint my fault, is it? And he knows I don't want no coaxing to lend him whatever he's a mind to: don't ye, Squire?"

Tom Seyton was too deep in the 'Times' to answer. It was not long before he found the paragraph he sought; as his eye lighted on it the eager expression of his face changed into one of blank disappointment; and he crushed the paper flat in his strong grip, with a muttered exclamation of surprise and anger that made both his hearers start.

"Lord save us, Squire! There's nothing wrong with Crusader, surely?"

Seyton was utterly guiltless of serious betting propensities; but for many years he had been wont, immediately after each Derby, to back his fancy for the next one, for one single £50 note. He had been lucky enough this year, as every one knew, to take 'forties' about a horse that had been rising steadily ever since, till he stood firm at very short odds; and Marlshire, thenceforward, became interested in the colt.

"No one is dead, I do hope?"—said the feminine sympathiser.

Seyton recovered himself quickly, and his brow cleared again as he answered,

"I haven't looked among the deaths, Miss Lucy; and Crusader's all right, Lester, as far as I know. Its another heavily-backed young one that has gone wrong; and for a race that you never had much interest in; nor I either, so far. I wish I hadn't now."

He handed back the 'Times' to the farmer, pointing with his finger to a certain place. There appeared the Oxford Class List just promulgated; and there—dividing with about thirty more the doubtful honours of a 'Third'—stood the name of

Vincentius Flemyng, ex Aede Christi.

Honest John Lester looked up into the other's face with a quaint puzzled expression, evidently overflowing with sympathy, but not knowing why or wherefore it was expected of him.

In spite of his vexation, Seyton almost laughed out, as he said—

"You must remember my brother-in-law; though he's not been much in these parts since he went to Oxford. Well—almost every one expected he would have come out among those first half-dozen; and—you see where he stands. It'll be a bitter disappointment to my wife; and I don't know how his mother will bear it. As for me——"

That good-hearted Tom wouldn't finish his sentence; it looked too like hitting a man when down, to confess that his own expectations had never been so sanguine.

The yeoman shook his grizzled head with intense gravity, as if he *now* thoroughly appreciated the whole length and breadth of the disaster; being still nearly as much in the dark as ever.

"Surely, I remember Master Vincent right well; a very pleasant-spoken young genelman; and main clever, I'll go bail. It's cruel hard on him, for sartin. Mayhap, though, he'll have better luck next time."

"I'm sure he will," Lucy chimed in, more energetically than

was her wont; "it couldn't be *his* fault either—whose-ever it was."

This it is that invests feminine condolence with its peculiar charm—the fair partisan is so daringly irrational in her sympathy; disdaining all forms of argument, save the pure and simple *petitio principii*.

Tom Seyton put both consolations aside, mildly but firmly.

"They don't run those races in heats, Lester; and they give no Consolation Stakes up there for beaten horses. Miss Lucy, it's just like you, to make excuses for everybody. But, if you take the fault off poor Vincent's heart, I fear you'll only shift it on to his head; unless, indeed, it was our fault, for always over-rating him. Well, I must be starting. I've a heavy message to carry home, and it won't grow any lighter by my loitering. Good-bye, and thanks."

So, without more ado, Tom Seyton got to horse, and five minutes later was almost clear of the town. But, before he quite emerged into the open fields, he was fated to meet with a fresh cause for pondering—if not for anxiety.

Tom Seyton was methodical in all things: his present vexation did not make him forget that his wife had entrusted him with a message to a certain bird-stuffer of local renown. To deliver this, he had to turn somewhat from his direct way home. A by-lane led back by a short cut into the main road; at a sharp angle in this he drew bridle involuntarily.

A narrow footpath, pent in on either side by a dead wall and an old-fashioned clipped hedge, branched off through a turnstile to the right. Just within this last a man and woman were standing, conversing so earnestly that they never heard the horse's hoofs till it was too late to retreat further into the shadow. No need to ask the subject of their talk; the veriest child could have told that they were practising an early scene in the greatest of all dramas—the only one of which, as actors or spectators, our kind has never grown a-weary; though its first un-dress rehearsal was enacted before the Seasons began.

Both started as the tall mounted figure loomed suddenly behind through the darkening twilight; but the male culprit—if fault there were—was palpably the most troubled and disconcerted

of the twain. As I have said, it was too late to retreat ; but he moved quickly so as to place himself directly between his companion and the new comer ; bending forward over her till her face was almost entirely concealed.

In truth, many men might have passed on, uncertain as to the damsel's identity ; but those keen grey eyes of Tom Seyton's had been trained by long practice in flight-shooting, till night and day were nearly alike to them ; he recognized the pair so thoroughly and instantaneously that he could hardly check an exclamation that sprang to his lips. After the first emotion of surprise, his natural delicacy reasserted itself ; he looked straight to his front, and passed on without an attempt at greeting, or one backward glance ; feeling absolutely ashamed of his involuntary intrusion. But, when he had gone a hundred yards or so, at the same slow pace as before, he drove his foot home in the stirrup with a gesture of angry impatience ; and began muttering to himself, half aloud—

“Then *he* means to make a fool of himself, after the fashion of his fathers ? It must be looked to at once. And yet one ought to be quite sure before making that poor mother of his miserable. The boy is nearly out of leading-strings, too, if he chooses to be desperate, and defy beggary. It's a puzzle altogether : I'll tell Kate about it : her head is worth a dozen of mine in cases of love-law. Bless her ! I wish that was the worst I had to tell her to-night : as for her mother——” a long low whistle completed the sentence. “Yes, you're quite right, Minnie ; I don't blame you for getting fretful : step out as fast as you like now, old lady. It's the same with trouble as with a big fence—the more you look at it, the less you like it : I never knew ‘craning’ help a man yet.”

So Tom Seyton gave his mare her head ; and, with more care *en croupe* than he had carried for many a day, rode homewards briskly through the night.

Let us linger, awhile, with the couple whose love-passages he lately disturbed. Inasmuch as to the historic eye all dark things are light, we may pass them under brief inspection, in despite of the gathering shadows.

CHAPTER IV.

FAMILY PORTRAITS.

TRULY, you might travel over many a league of English ground before meeting with a handsomer pair. Yet the one point that strikes you first, is the marked contrast between the two.

The girl is a superb specimen of that peculiar type of beauty, common to almost all nations of Scandinavian origin—not necessarily involving purity of blood or descent; for you find it as often amongst the peasantry as in any other order. We all know its characteristics; unsparing wealth of golden hair, not over fine or silky, as a rule; long, lithe, shapely limbs; and a roundness of contour, apt to become massively luxuriant all too soon; clear cut aquiline features; a broad white brow, overhanging the splendours of brightest blue eyes, less apt to melt than to sparkle; last, but not least, a glorious complexion, in which red and white are too rarely mingled for imitation by any human hand.

It would, perhaps, be hard to say why, looking on beauty such as this, we seem to feel, instinctively, that the animal element there must dominate over the intellectual; and why, wishing to do it honour, we should exalt every other epithet before we think of—‘lovely.’

Nevertheless, of love at first sight (in the vulgar acceptance of the term), these magnificent *blondes* always can claim their fair share: of admiration, they engross more than an arithmetical proportion. If Bessie Standen carries her handsome head somewhat higher than quite becomes a modest maiden, it is surely by right of many conquests.

Now—turn and look at Brian Maskelyne. Not often, near the centre of the temperate zone, do you meet with those smooth soft cheeks, like white camellia petals—pale before the gloss of youth and health has left them; that blue-black hair all crisp and waving; those great velvety eyes, sleeping indolently in their languid lustre, till some strong passion makes them gleam like a jaguar’s.

It is one of those faces into which you will see fortune-tellers and the like peer ever wistfully ; even their simple science can tell that such are generally doomed, at one season or another in life, to figure in some sad, if not sinful, story.

A few months still must pass before Brian Maskelyne shall attain his legal majority ; nor, even then, does he come into the lordship of the broad demesnes to which he is the sole heir. Nay : it is in his power wilfully to cast away his birthright ; for not an acre of the Mote property is now entailed.

When the will of Brian's father was opened, some ten years ago, many cried shame on it ; and a few scrupled not to accuse the widow of having beguiled a weak uxorious husband into indulging her with an undue stretch of authority, at the expense of her son.

The terms of the will ran thus :—

On Brian Maskelyne's attaining the age of twenty-one, he became entitled to a yearly allowance of £1000 ; four years later—should no forfeiture intervene—he came into unfettered possession of his whole inheritance. Also, if in the mean time he should marry with his mother's full consent, Mote, and all thereto belonging, became absolutely Brian's, for settlement or any other purpose. But if, before attaining the said age of twenty-five, he should contract a legal marriage, unknown to his mother or against her will, then the whole fee-simple of the estates, and the disposal of all real and personal property whatsoever, became vested at once in Mrs Maskelyne ; to be bequeathed or dealt with as she thought proper. Nor could Brian ever claim anything beyond the above-mentioned £1000 in the shape of an annuity without power of anticipation. This pittance the testator considered just sufficient to give bread and plain meat to a Maskelyne who had lost caste : he did not wish to bequeath to such an one more. In the event of Mrs Maskelyne's death before any of these conditions were fulfilled, nearly the same powers were entrusted to certain trustees, whereof Seyton of Warleigh was the chief. But, in this last case, the property real and personal passed, so soon as the forfeiture should be complete, to the Maskelyne that chanced then to be the next of kin.

A strange will, no doubt ; yet, perhaps, neither were poor

George Maskelyne's folly, nor his fair wife's ambition, so overweening as Marshshire gossips would have them. Looking back carefully at the records of Mote, you would possibly abate in your wonder. From its very origin there has brooded a curse over that ancient house—the curse of wilful misalliance. Like other hereditary diseases, it would leap over a generation or so—only to break out more fatally in the next.

Now the men who successively did this wrong to the family-honour, seemed impelled thereto by some temptation, not to be explained by reference to the general tenour of their lives.

There was the wicked favourite, whom the fourth Edward loved—if he trusted not—right well; chiefly because he knew him to be more wild and reckless than himself; indeed, men said, that whether in love or war, the kingly Belial could hardly keep pace with the meaner fiend. Is it not written—how Hugh de Maskelyne wedded the daughter of Sebastian the thievish Portingall scrivener, lusting more after her beauty than her gold; and how, two years later, he arose early from a debauch, and sate, with an evil laugh on his flushed handsome face, while his father-in-law was maimed and burnt in the pillory?

There was Richard Maskelyne: sworn boon-companion of Rochester and Etherege; known in all that set as the Devil's Dick; to whom Sedley indited the most blasphemous of his sonnets. Before his beard was grey, he took to wife the offspring of one of his own tenants; a buxom Blousalinda, who outlived all his brutality, and buried him at last, more decently than he deserved; though she professed herself heart-broken before the honeymoon had waned.

Lastly—not to multiply examples—there was Brian's own grand-uncle Godfrey; whom the Regent, not unfrequently, named master of his revels; who would play any man for his estate, or any woman for her honour; one who, all his life long, had made a mock at every honest and holy thing—at matrimony most of all. It was more than a nine-days' wonder, when he placed a nuptial wreath on the false hair of an opera-singer, with a reputation more cracked than her voice, and who had made a science of infidelity. Be it recorded though, to La Signora's credit, that she forbore to

palm on the family the mockery of an heir; so the direct line was spared so much of shame.

Now, when it is considered that, in all human probability, these men could have compassed their desire at a far less costly price than the sacrifice of their name,—it being premised, too, that of all the commandments they notoriously least regarded the Seventh,—their aberration can hardly be explained, save on the ground of an hereditary malady: a pagan fatalist would have absolved them at once, as unaccountable agents of a Nemesis.

With these examples, and many more, before his eyes, George Maskelyne signed his last will and testament. There was nothing of the domestic tyrant in his nature; for he was a mild man, of weak constitution and studious habits, nervously anxious to please everybody, and devotedly fond of his only child. It is probable that his sole intent was to keep Brian under watch and ward till the first folly of youth was overpast; just like that Arabian king who locked up his son in a lonely tower during the season marked out as fatal by the stars.

A wise and just precaution; did it ever once avail? I trow not. The locksmith is yet to be born whose bolts will baffle the cunning burglars—Love and Fate.

To return to that pair of innocent lambs. There is one other point to be noted about Bessie Standen.

In spite of her superb exterior, after the first glance, you become aware of an indefinable something, that forbids you to credit her with good birth or breeding; there is a want of the self-possession and self-reliance inherent in imperial beauty: in her bearing there is too much of defiance, in her eye too much of a challenge.

And—listen—the first words that fall from her red ripe lips, are not precisely drops of honey-dew.

“You need not have been so flurried, Brian, nor so anxious to hide me. I don’t believe your fine friend, whoever he was, had time, in this light, to recognize either of us. It’s rather early in the day, too—to feel ashamed of being seen with me.”

Brian looked her full in the face, with the earnest melancholy gaze that puzzled her uncomfortably, at times—with all her superiority in age and worldly wisdom.

"You're quite wrong, Bessie," he said gently. "There's nothing 'fine' about Tom Seyton, as all Marlishire would tell you: if I had known who it was, at first, I should not have been so anxious to hide you; though he's quite at home at Mote, and may one day be my guardian. As for his not recognizing us both—you don't know those hawk's eyes of his as well as I do. But I don't think he would have the heart to betray me, even to my mother. You shouldn't taunt me with over-caution: prudence is hard enough to practise, even when you preach it. Ashamed—ashamed of *you*, my queen! What makes me as patient as I am—except looking forward to the day when you shall carry your head as high as the haughtiest of them all? Darling, you're not like yourself to-night, or you would never have spoken so."

His voice shook a little as he ended; if the language was somewhat over-strained, as is often the case in boyish eloquence, it rang true as steel. Bessie Standen's shapely shoulder stirred once, impatiently; but—perhaps in spite of herself—she answered in a softened tone, with a tinge of banter in it notwithstanding.

"Poor child! *Was* I cross with it? See, I fold my hands and ask pardon—so prettily! And that was Mr Seyton, was it? Perhaps he did recognize me; but I dare say you're right in trusting his discretion. Brian, dear, you mustn't mind my pettishness—I've been more worried at home of late than I can tell you. Yes. I know you'd help me if you could; but you can't, just now, at all events. Only you must not keep me another minute, I've stayed out too late as it is. I'll write, of course; and we shall meet again very soon. There—just—one—no more." (This sentence is rather hard to 'stop' correctly.) "You are not to follow me one step beyond the turn of the lane. I can perfectly well take care of myself."

There was no second meaning intended in these last words; yet her lover felt strangely conscious of their truth, as he watched the firm elastic footfalls that carried Bessie Standen so swiftly away, through alternate light and darkness. As he turned slowly away from the trysting-place, he chid himself for feeling so depressed and melancholy; but, surely, a man should be far advanced in

middle-age, ere—even to his own conscience—he need give reason for every sigh.

Not having any special reasons for discretion, we will take leave to accompany yon fair damsel, even to her own fireside.

The first glimpse of the interior is not attractive. Whisky and strong Virginian tobacco are excellent things in their season—foul fall the faitour who would disparage either—but, consumed in large quantities when the day is young, they affect the bystander with a disagreeable sense of incongruity, and are apt to lay a heavy burden on the atmosphere. Bessie, apparently, was used to this sort of proceeding in her family circle; for her fair face, as she entered, betrayed no disgust or surprise; only its expression, that during her homeward walk had become somewhat softened and subdued, grew harder and more defiant, quickly—as silver tarnishes passing through sulphuric fumes.

On one side of a fierce fire sate the master of the household—a handsome, large-framed man of the florid type, not so long ago; but late hours and hard living have filled and marred the outlines both of face and figure, till, compared with his former self, he looks like a coarse woodcut by the side of a fine steel engraving.

Mr Standen had resided four years or so at Torrcaster, and of his antecedents absolutely nothing was known. He had no ostensible profession, unless constant attendance at all the principal race-meetings can be called such; but he had paid his way fairly enough so far, living very much at his ease in all respects, and keeping two or three useful horses in his stable. These he rode soberly, throughout the winter, with the Marlshire hounds; evidently looking out after business rather than sport; for he never negotiated a hurdle unless a probable customer were near, in which case he would occasionally astonish the natives (who are not easily surprised) not a little, by a performance over stiff timber. For reasons best known to himself, he never allowed his beautiful Bessie to show in the hunting-field, though she rode boldly and gracefully.

Mr Standen's was a very uncertain position; for the aristocracy, both of city and county, persisted in ignoring his presence on all occasions, or, at the best, indulged him with the coolest

nod ; whilst he affected to consider himself as above familiarity with the wealthy burghers. But he was not troubled with any acute sensibilities, and lived, to all appearances, contentedly enough in his narrow circle of acquaintance. This was made up of some half-dozen residents in Torrcaster—social anomalies like himself—and certain strangers of horsey exterior, who dropped in uninvited for a flying visit. His boon-companion, on the present occasion, was by far the most assiduous of these casual familiars.

Christopher Daventry's was rather a remarkable face. The upper part was nearly perfect ; dense, well-pencilled brows arched themselves imposingly over a pair of keen black eyes, and the nose was really a study of delicate chiselling ; but the mouth and chin spoilt all. In spite of an unusually luxuriant beard (which he cultivated, as if conscious of the defects alluded to), before ever he opened his lips, you felt that the man was cunning, and sensual, and cruel.

He was known among racing-men as "Kit, the Lawyer;" or the Lawyer, *tout court* ; and, though he was scarcely turned of thirty, he had earned the *soubriquet* right well, by an extraordinary astuteness in picking his way through the miry labyrinths of turf-law. He sailed very close to the wind at times, so that his sails seemed shaking perilously ; but, thus far, he had evaded both shipwreck and capture ; though his movements were jealously looked after, in certain quarters, just as a notorious privateer is watched by a neutral port-admiral. Once caught red-handed, the Lawyer knew right well what he had to expect—"a short shrift and a long rope."

The unhealthy atmosphere—physically and morally speaking—of a gambler's life, seemed to suit Kit Daventry's constitution ; that head was as cool and as hard as his heart, and equally proof against impression *ab extra*. On the present occasion there was not a flush on his cheek, nor the faintest unsteadiness of hand, or tongue, or eye ; though the signs of debauch were plain to read on the face of his seasoned companion, and they had "drank fair" all through the afternoon.

Both the men nodded carelessly to Miss Standen as she entered, but only the younger spoke.

"Well, Bessie, what's your best news? It's time I were off; but I waited for the last tip from your training-ground. Did the colt go a strong gallop this afternoon? Don't be shy about it."

The voice was rather a pleasant one than otherwise, and devoid of any vulgarity of accent; indeed, people were often struck with the contrast between Kit Daventry's tones and the slanginess of speech in which he was prone to indulge.

The girl did not answer at once, but crossed the room with her quick, decisive step, and came close behind the last speaker's chair: she took off her coquettish little hat, and tossed it aside; shaking back, at the same time, the gorgeous masses of her golden hair, with a gesture of impatient weariness, that yet was not ungraceful. Any bystander must needs have been struck just then with a certain family likeness between all the three; nor was this wonderful, for the man whose shoulder touched Bessie Standen's rounded arm, was her own first-cousin.

"Shy?" she said, rather bitterly than angrily. "It's late in the day to talk of such things to *me*. But I've no news worth the telling. It's the same old story—'Patience, only a little longer.' I do so hate the part I've to play, and I began to hate myself to-day—don't ask me why; I don't know, or care to know. And suppose it were all wasted—all the pain, and trouble, and shame. Don't laugh, Kit. I won't bear it; it *is* shame—black and bitter—or *I* shouldn't feel it."

Daventry's lip, that had begun to curl, set itself savagely, as Bessie ceased speaking, with a sob that she tried hard to stifle; but, before he could reply, Mr Standen's thick, hoarse voice broke in: he stood rather in awe of his clever nephew, and, save when far gone in drink, rarely ventured to beard him.

"Leave the girl alone," he said; "I won't have her chaffed and bullied. It's just like you—to sit soaking and smoking there, and sneer at her when she comes in, after doing her best. Never mind him, Bessie dear; we'll have the laugh on our side, when your're mistress of Mote. Don't you get down-hearted: it's a stake worth waiting for; and even if the big *coup* don't come off, you'll always have a good name and a thousand a year to fall back upon. As for shame—that's my look-out: it's no shame in you to do your father's bidding."

The brief flush of anger that made his first words sound almost manly, faded as he was speaking; the last were uttered in a querulous whine: of a truth he did look, just then, so very base and degraded, that—though ungrateful—it did not seem unnatural, when Bessie turned impatiently away from her partisan, addressing rather the bolder villain.

“Do you hear him?” she said. “As if a thousand a-year, with no expectations, would be any use to us! Why, we spend more than that—living as we do.” (Her glance, sweeping round the dingy room, spoke volumes of scornful commentary.) “As for a name—it’s worth to us what it’s worth in the market—no more.”

The Lawyer shrugged his shoulders, with the air of one who, having much the best of the position, has neither time nor inclination to quarrel.

“You’re both more than half right, if you’d only drop your heroics. The big stake is worth waiting for, Uncle James; and I’m the last man alive to advise forcing the running. And, Bessie, I back you—so far; if you can’t have Lombard Street, it’s no use squeezing the orange dry. It’s just possible, too, that the young one’s name is as good now as ever it will be. I’m all for keeping things dark at present. No one saw you together to-day, Bessie?”

“No one, except Tom Seyton. I’m not much afraid of him; he’s too simple to see any harm in innocent flirtation, and too good-natured to throw stones at butterflies. He don’t give me credit for biting or stinging, I’m certain; indeed, I think, he rather admires me, in a distant, honest way.”

Daventry’s black brows contracted, till the double arches were nearly one.

“That’s all you know about it,” he said, rudely. “Why, you had better have done your love-making in the market-square, than in a corner where Tom Seyton could light on you. Good-natured and simple, eh! Listen, now I was at Brentwood races two years ago, when there was a row about The Vixen being pulled; it wasn’t half a bad case of roping; the mare ran forward enough to satisfy most people; but a few would have it that she never got her head loose. That kind-hearted

fool of yours was the acting steward. Wrington, who owned and trained the mare, was had up in the Stand. I couldn't hear what was said; but I was near enough to see. I saw, by Wrington's face, that he was trying to laugh it off; and I saw Tom Seyton's set, all of a sudden, like a flint-stone. He did not make a long speech; but, before it was over, Ben was looking like a whipped hound. No wonder: he might as well have shot the mare, for all the use she's been since: they've stopped her with the weight in every handicap, and the Club keeps a sharp look-out on the whole stable. That was Tom Seyton's work: he said he'd do it that day: and he kept his word. As for admiring you—you vain monkey—he hasn't an eye for a woman alive, except his own wife. He don't trust you far, either, depend on it; and he'd shoot Brian Maskelyne dead, sooner than see him married to Jem Standen's daughter.

"And the Lawyer's poor cousin"—the girl retorted; sweeping a saucy courtesy. "It's a pity to leave out any of my disqualifications. Well—it can't be helped now: we'll hope there's no harm done. I'm not going to quarrel. I felt rather inclined for it when I came in; but I find I'm too tired. I shall lie down till I feel hungry: I suppose you dined hours ago. Don't lose your train, Kit. You won't shake hands? Good night, then. I hope you'll come back in a better temper!"

Daventry seemed determined not to notice her departure, though his countenance was rather thoughtful than sullen; but, as Bessie turned in the doorway, he looked up, and met the full mocking light of her great blue eyes: his wicked face wore a curious smile, as he rose quickly, and followed her into the little hall without. For several minutes Mr Standen's head had sunk drowsily on his breast, and he had taken no part in the family council with voice or ear.

"Hold on a minute, Bessie," her cousin said. "Don't let us part in the sulks. There's been bother enough to-day, to cross a better temper than mine. What do you think of Linda's breaking down badly, just after our money had gone on? She couldn't have lost at Gainsborough. I haven't told *him* about it; it's no use. If you don't dock his drink, he'll

get quite childish soon. We must get money to winter on now, by fair means or foul. Do you think the young one would put his name to paper? It would 'melt' easily enough, though he is under age."

These few words of careless kindness brought a softer look on Bessie Standen's face than her boy-lover had ever seen.

"Is it so bad as that?" she whispered. "Well—I must try, I suppose. But you won't make me speak to him till there is really need? Something might turn up any day. And, Kit—you might give me a little more encouragement, instead of always taunting and scolding me. I do my best to please you. All other decoy-ducks are fed—sometimes at least."

Daventry stooped forward (tall as she was, she was the shorter by a head), and looked hard into her eyes, till his own shot forth evil gleams.

"What's the use of self-denial," he muttered, "when one gets no credit for it?"

And he kissed her thrice, passionately.

The girl took the caress, not eagerly, but with a quiet contentment, as a hard-worked sempstress might take her week's wages: she took it without a shade of shrinking or coyness; though on her lips, not an hour ago, was laid, lightly and reverently, Brian Maskelyne's pledge of affiance.

The contrast was so great, that, if faith and honesty were silent, worldly wisdom might well have spoken loud in warning. On the one side there were—a pure chivalrous devotion, a high social estate, an ancient and stainless name, to win; on the other—

Bah! It skills not talking of these things. It is the old story of the Eastern Queen. Sitting at the state banquet by the side of her fair young husband—with the choicest dainties of one hemisphere before her, and a thousand hearts panting to do her bidding—she only counts the minutes that shall bring her to the hovel of her swart, thick-lipped paramour, where her food will be garbage, her greeting, curses and blows.

Of all created beings, there is none more thoroughly disinterested than a woman bent on casting herself away. Only—such self-sacrifices, instead of winning approving smiles from Heaven, must needs make merriment in Hell.

CHAPTER V

PARCERE DEVICTIS.

THE general aspect of Marlshire is rather the reverse of mountainous; indeed, its mild attempts at the picturesque are limited to diversities—not violently striking—of wood and water. But the natives have always been proud of their fertile champaign; and rather disposed to pity than to envy the dwellers in the hill-country. Even where the ground rises gradually, so that, by a stretch of courtesy, it might be called an eminence, the spot seems to have had little attraction for the builders of aforesaid; it is in sheltered nooks and grassy hollows that most of the more ancient mansions are placed; if you see a house otherwise situated, it is next to a certainty that its foundation-stone is not a century old.

Warleigh was no exception to this rule. Lying somewhat remote from the high road—you might have ridden within half a mile of its chimneys without noticing them, unless the smoke-wreaths curling over the dense tree-tops caught your eye. The house itself was a low broad pile of building; rather attractive, architecturally, from its irregularity and grotesque confusion of styles—a very *olla podrida* in brick and stone. Only in the stables could you detect any unity of design; and these were evidently much more modern in date than any part of the mansion. Neither were the approaches in anywise imposing: the seventy-acre bit of grass-land, immediately round the house, looked more like a paddock than a park; near the gate, at one corner of this, stood a modest lodge; but it was evidently placed there rather for the gamekeepers' convenience (at the angle of a principal cover), than because a proud porter was considered necessary. Entering from the other side, you had to traverse a long range of meadows, and to open an uncertain number of gates for yourself.

But Tom Seyton's friends were used to this; and—though

they used to ask sometimes, "when that West Lodge was going to be built that he was always promising them"—they never expected that such an extravagance would be committed in *his* time.

The four leagues home from Torrcaster were done, as usual, under the hour that evening; but Minnie was champing her bit, and shaking her knowing head, quite gaily, when she slackened speed at the entrance of a green bridle-road, about a mile from her stable-door; it was simply from force of habit that she did this, for, unless under sore stress of weather or circumstances, Tom Seyton always brought his cattle in cool. He was in no especial hurry now; for he let the good bay mare have her own way, and rode slowly on, with slackened reins; evidently musing again. He unlatched the lodge-gate for himself almost mechanically, and hardly raised his head to look around him, till he had passed under the archway of the stable-yard. But his reverie was very quickly broken, by the first words of the groom who came out to meet him.

"Please, sir, Mr Vincent's come—not half an hour ago. You didn't leave no orders; so there was nothing to meet him at the station."

Seyton was as little given to outward signs of emotion as any old troop-horse, but he started very perceptibly now.

"Mr Vincent come?" he repeated, in rather a bewildered way. "No, of course, I gave no orders. I hadn't a notion of his coming so soon. I'm very glad though."

These last words were spoken more to himself than to the groom. *Was* he really glad? He walked quickly across the yard, as if he cared not to take time to answer a misgiving.

There never breathed a more hospitable creature than Tom Seyton; the merest stranger was always welcome at Warleigh; he would have hated himself for ever if—even in thought—he had grudged entertainment to his Kate's own brother.

But adversity has its awkward, as well as its distressing, side; a great defeat, even though it involve no deep disgrace, is more difficult to grapple with than a great sorrow.

They were heathens all, trained in the flinty-hearted school of Lycurgus; yet was it not wholly against nature, when, in

Sparta, after a disastrous battle, women knelt before the altar clad in bright raiment, with garlands in their hair; while others sate at home in mourning garb, refusing to be comforted. The first were thanking the gods for the honour of their house kept safe, though their hearths were made childless for ever; the last—making moan over sons, who had come back, to tell of lost or tarnished shields.

Besides this, the kindest natures are not always the readiest in condolence: so it was likely enough, that Seyton should feel rather aggrieved at not having more time to prepare himself for encounter with the mighty fallen. In the other scale was to be set, the intense relief of finding himself no longer the first herald of evil tidings. On the whole, before he had crossed the stable-yard, Tom was nearly ready with his favourite commonplace—"It's all for the best."

Unless you passed through the offices, the nearest way to Seyton's own 'den' was through a postern-door, opening into a nook of turf, separated from the rest of the gardens by a tall hedge of clipped holly. The said den was a large, low room, with three windows looking out on the grass-plot, from which the sills were about breast high.

Those latticed casements were all a-glow just then; though no lamp or candle was lighted, the deep lurid glow from several burning oak-logs was quite enough, to throw out in strong relief the figure of a woman sitting on a deep rocking-chair, close to the hearth, with her back to the windows, and her head bent forward on her breast. You do not know that figure yet; but Tom Seyton did, right well.

"Poor pet!" he said, half aloud. "So they've sent her to ground, already"

Mrs Seyton was accustomed—when beset by any doubt, or difficulty, or danger whatsoever—to 'head' at once for her husband's den (if he chanced to be absent it was just the same); on such occasions it was almost impossible to prevent her 'making her point;' and very difficult to dislodge her, till the tyranny was over-past.

She was either dozing now, or in deep thought; for she never noticed the rustle of Seyton's sleeve against the lattice;

but, though the passage was carpeted with thick matting over stone, she started up at first sound of his foot within the outer door, and met him as he entered, with a smile on her face, still wet with recent tears.

"Oh, Tom," she said; "you know it all? And you know he's come?"

Before her husband answered a word, he wound his arm round the pretty speaker's waist, and kissed her twice or thrice.

Many moons have waxed and waned since Tom Seyton brought his bride home to Warleigh, but he is still prone to osculation as ever. Whether the subject under discussion be welcome or disagreeable—whether the sympathy expected from him be grave or gay—he invariably opens the proceedings of the Cabinet Council with this absurd ceremony; which he would no more think of omitting, than grace before meat. The number of matrimonial salutes that Tom must have fired in his time, is absolutely bewildering to think of; but the satisfaction of both parties concerned seems unabated; so it is best to leave them in their follies, especially as such are only committed *en champ-clos*.

There was no remarkable beauty in Kate Seyton's face, yet was it one of those on which the eye loves to linger: their attraction is rather hard to define; but it somewhat resembles that of a pleasant home-landscape, seen in the fresh light of early morning. It was a face to invite confidence—not familiarity, in the worst sense of the word. The muster-roll of her Marlshire friends, of high or low degree, might compare with that of any line regiment; but the county would have risen against you, to a man, had you hinted at a flirtation of Mrs Seyton's. No wonder: he would be a very remarkable *roué*, who could speak of Kate and coquetry in a single breath, after one steady look into her clear brown eyes.

One hears of certain exceptional couples that 'were made for each other;' surely, if there be such a thing as predestination in matrimony, it is exemplified in the case before us. In some respects, the characters of Kate and her husband seem moulded on identical lines.

Both have the same sensible straightforward way of meeting a difficulty—the same knack of cutting a tangled knot with an honest down-right blow—the same happy faculty of looking ever on the brighter side of life's changes and chances—the same simple tastes, and keen sense of innocent enjoyments. Indeed, though there is nothing masculine, or even amazonian, in Kate, she sympathizes heartily with every one of her husband's favourite pursuits, and is never so happy as when by his side in the open air. She is a frequent guest throughout the winter at all the country-houses, great and small, within twenty miles of Warleigh; and never—unless Lucina, by chance, forbid—misses a county ball. But the visiting-lists of Belgravia know not her name: she has never spent a whole fortnight in town since she was presented, on marriage. When other women are setting their homes in order, for the duty-dinners and obligatory 'at homes' of the coming season, Kate is preparing to start for that famous Norse river, through whose eddies many a mighty *Salar* has rushed to his death, to the music of Tom Seyton's whirring reel; and over whose waters her own fly has fluttered—not always harmlessly. In the early days of her matron-hood, there was a slight difference of conjugal opinion on the point of her riding to hounds: she wished to do so without restrictions; to which Tom said, Nay, inflexibly. But Kate was soon persuaded that a man, going straight over the Marlshire country, has quite enough on his hands, without constant solicitude for a dearer safety than his own; so—with just a little sigh—she gave up her maiden-dreams of venatic glory, and resigned herself to judicious short-cuts, and rapid road-riding; 'throwing a modest lep' occasionally, when absolutely unavoidable. Even so, she sees more of a run than nine-tenths of the nickers and skirthers; indeed, some elderly and timid sportsmen in these parts are very prone to follow that fair and cunning pilot.

I am not attempting to sketch a perfect character; so it costs me no pain to confess that, as a mother of a steadily increasing family, Mrs Seyton was not wholly blameless; if its well-being had solely depended on her constant supervision, things would have gone hard with the nursery at Warleigh.

Yet there was little or no selfishness in this seeming neglect ; the fact was simply this : loving her children much, Kate loved her husband more ; for years, he had been so perpetually foremost in her thoughts, that Tom's comfort and satisfaction had become to her almost the whole fulfilling of the domestic law. To be sure, her progeny thrived so wonderfully, that there was little cause for maternal anxiety. The Dark Angel, whose wings had overshadowed other homesteads near, had thus far spared the 'young barbarians' of Warleigh. They grew up, noisily and merrily ; regarding their mother rather as a favourite playmate, than as a parent to be revered or obeyed : a most undecorous state of things, certainly ; but convenient enough, while it lasted.

When you have marked that, with all her ten years of matron-hood, Kate Seyton's figure is still temptingly taper and trim—her silky hair just as abundant, her step as elastic as it was at sweet sixteen—though tannage of wind and sun have darkened the early peach-bloom of her cheek into a clear ruddy brown—you will have seen enough of the portrait of the Pet of Marlshire.

After the pause and preliminaries above-mentioned, came Seyton's answer.

"Yes, child : I've heard that Vincent's come ; and I saw the 'Times' in Torrecaster. But I shan't know all, till I know how you and the Madre take it. I've been thinking of that all the way home."

"I can hardly tell you yet," Kate said. "It came upon us so very suddenly. We were sitting in the library, and never heard Vincent ring. He came in, all at once, and threw that dreadful Class-paper into mamma's lap, without speaking one word. She was braver than could be expected—far braver than I could be ; for I had to creep away here, almost directly. to have my 'cry' out."

Her husband's broad brow contracted ; and his lip curled, somewhat scornfully.

"Better than could be expected—you may well say that, my Kate. I never could see the pull of these stage-tricks in society ; especially when women's nerves are played upon. Why

couldn't Vincent tell his story like a man—instead of like an actor?"

"Oh, Tom!" she broke in. "You mustn't speak so—even to me. You can't think how beautifully he bears it."

Seyton sat down in a convenient arm-chair; still clasping his wife's waist in his arm, and drawing her pretty head closer to his shoulder. His face was very plain-spoken as a rule; it wore a quaint expression now, wavering between provocation and amusement.

"Bears it beautifully, does he? Why, darling, to hear you one would think Vincent was the victim of some great treachery, or undeserved misfortune, at the very least."

Kate moved aside, rather pettishly; though she did not try quite to escape from the strong clasp that held her.

"And the examination *was* very unfair," she said. "I heard enough to be sure of that, before I came away. And it's too unkind of you—to begin to be sarcastic, just now."

The idea, of putting sarcasm and Tom Seyton into the same sentence! The self-evident absurdity almost upset the gravity of the accused, albeit he was not naturally quick at taking a joke: he well-nigh laughed out loud.

"My darling, if I'm sarcastic I'm like the man who talked prose without knowing it. I don't want to be unfeeling, either; only I can't help remembering that, when Vincent missed the Newdigate, you all clung to some story about the judges not looking through half the poems. What notions you must have of the corruption of Dons. They were a very fair and straightforward lot, in my time. And why should they have any special spite against any one man? Depend on it, they know nothing about 'nobbling favourites,' there. Whatever the game is—I'd rather hear the loser complain of luck than of foul play. It's the worst form out, if you can't prove your case."

"I won't argue with you," Kate retorted; and, this time, she drew herself quite free. "Wait till you've heard Vincent's story, and then be as obstinate and incredulous as you please. Only—don't try to persuade mamma or me."

Tom Seyton dropped his head slightly; shaking his ears the

while, as you may see a high-couraged pointer do, when sharply chidden.

"You little vixen!" he said, as he rose. "I wouldn't contradict you again—alone; much less with the Madre at your back. Stay here, whilst I go and see Vincent: it's best to get that over at once. I won't tease him, now or ever; I promise you."

Quoth Tom to himself, as he crossed the hall—

"If poor Vincent failed in his logic-paper, the examiners must be much harder to deal with than the woman-kind at Warleigh."

The library was a long, narrow apartment; with four tall mullioned windows looking out on the principal flower-garden, and a deep oriel at the end. A bright, cheerful room by day—the profusion of dark oak book-cases, filled with dusky and dusty volumes, made it gloomy after nightfall; so that the family-party, sitting there of an evening, was fain to break up into groups; each creating for itself a little isle of light in the sea of shadow.

Only two reading-lamps were burning when Seyton entered; near one of these, at the further extremity of the room, close to the curtains of the oriel, the Victim and his mother sate together.

Mrs Flemyng had been a remarkably pretty woman in her time; and her appearance might still have been very attractive, had it not been for a certain peculiarity of manner and address—so aggravating, even to disinterested strangers, that these were wont to marvel how the patience of her familiars held out.

Many years ago, in the pride and prime of her beauty, some misguided admirer detected a striking resemblance between Mrs Flemyng and a famous picture of St Cecilia. The good lady—whose weakest point, then, was personal vanity—was intensely flattered, and resolved to profit by the discovery. Unfortunately her acquaintance with the biographies of the Calendar was rather limited and vague: she could not disassociate saintliness from suffering; so, ever since that unlucky day, she had considered it incumbent upon her to *poser en martyre*. Had she only done so outwardly, it would not have mattered so

much; for—possessing, as she did, large plaintive eyes, shaded by long silky lashes—the effect was rather becoming; and, at the worst, could but have been wearisome from too frequent repetition. But, to such as realized that the attitude of meek resignation was moral, no less than physical, it was unexpressibly provoking.

For Mrs Flemyng's path through life had been singularly smooth and straight: she had never known personal distress or difficulty: her one serious grief had been the loss of a husband whom she loved after a discreet, dispassionate fashion; and, ever since that event, her kinsfolk and relations had been as unanimous in comforting and consoling her widowhood, as if she had meditated social Sutteeism.

Notwithstanding these drawbacks, it was no wonder that she had many warm friends, or that her own family were so fond of her: she couldn't help looking injured; but she never said a hard word to or of any living creature; and was perfectly devoted to her children—carrying devotion, in her son's case, to idolatry.

As the fortunes of the said son form a main part of this veracious tale, it may be well to give him the advantage of a fair start in a fresh chapter.

CHAPTER VI.

ICONOCLASM.

VINCENT FLEMYNG was strikingly like his mother: in his face all the best points of hers were reproduced—great delicacy and regularity of outline, dark expressive eyes, and a complexion very clear, though pale. It would have been nearly perfect, had it not been spoiled by an evident infirmity of purpose about the mouth, and a disagreeable expression alternately

peevish and supercilious. It was eminently the face of a spoiled child : considering the circumstances, this was no wonder.

The family-worship of which Vincent Flemyng was the object, was centred on him at a very early age. Before he was eight years old, his mother and sister used to quote his witticisms to their familiars, as if the mantle of Selwyn or Jekyll already rested on his shoulders ; albeit he had never uttered anything above the commonest level of boyish banter ; which, as is well known, depends entirely on the retort—more or less uncourteous. Vincent lost his father very early : whatever other sins of omission that easy-going divine may have had on his conscience, it would not be fair to hold him in anywise responsible for the faulty education of the son. It may be supposed that Mrs Flemyng would be extremely loth to send her darling adrift on the troubled waters of public-school life ; but she was peculiarly unlucky, as it turned out, in her choice of a tutor. An honest, plain-spoken man, with some strength of will and principle, might have done wonders for the boy, who was anything but bad-hearted *au fond*.

But the Reverend James Redland was simply a selfish Epicurean ; with just enough of worldly wisdom to be tenacious of a comfortable berth, when once fairly established therein. He was indolent, too, to a miracle : you might see him, often, basking in the sun in summer, or before a fierce fire in the winter, with an empty pipe between his lips ; because he was too idle to rise and fill it. It was far less trouble to float upon the tide of feminine enthusiasm, than to try to stem or turn it into a juster channel : not actually prompting the rhapsodies of the devotees—he sealed them with a mute consent, and a smile, that was always ready, if sometimes cynical. Yet, with all his faults, Mr Redland was a brilliant scholar : he had taken high honours at the University in spite of that incorrigible indolence engrained into his nature ; and still kept up his reading in a desultory amateur sort of way ; finding familiar classical ground much easier travelling, than any of those modern works of fiction that involved a mental grapple with their plot.

Thus it befell that, when Vincent Flemyng at the mature age

of thirteen, went up for his preliminary examination at the great public school of —, he was found very much forwarder than the average of his comrades, and was highly placed accordingly; so highly, indeed, that he sat down at once above the salt, as far as fagging was concerned.

Strange to say—even in that new phase of life, the spoiling process went on, steadily.

Jack Gratrex, undisputed Cock of the school (and—if his admirers were to be believed—of half the country beside), was in the same house, and at once spread over Vincent the shadow of his seven-fold shield. Jack said—"he knew the Flemyngs at home;" which was true: it was also true that, at the bottom of his big boyish heart, he nourished a hopeless Cymoniacal passion for the pretty Kate. Any one seriously molesting her brother would have fared, under those brawny hands, not much better than did the groom who smote Lufra, the gaze-hound of the Douglas. It was rather hard on Jack, that his simple chivalry was never called into play; for his protégé soon began to win an independent popularity.

Even at that time — was a very famous school: the personal influence and characteristics of the wise strong-willed man, who was then the fountain-head of authority, seemed to filtrate through the whole system, with the happiest results: in those days there came forth from the gates under the square grey towers, many brilliant scholars; but more sound Christians, and right-minded gentlemen. But the purely aristocratic element was very scantily represented there; and—as it is invariably the case in communities so constituted—stood at a proportionate social premium.

I cannot see that 'flunkiness' is necessarily involved in such a state of things; though this apparent contradiction has been a stock-joke against all democracies, since the world was young. If our American cousins are apt to be extravagant in their lionization of a lord, it might be remembered that such an apparition, in flesh and blood, has, till lately, been scarcely more common out there, than that of a Choctaw chief or Nepaulese ambassador within the Four Seas. It strikes me, *we* have bowed down, in our time, before a Bahadoor or so, whose

moral characters would bear no close inspection. Advantage of birth is like any other rarity, after all: it may well have an attraction in divers places, wholly independent of any intrinsic excellence in the possessor.

However this may be, it is certain that the 'blue blood,' faintly leavening the honest lump of the Third Estate, was highly, if unconsciously, valued at —: neither was title, or an honourable prefix, indispensable.

When the merits of different public-schools were first discussed, Mrs Flemyng was strongly for Eton; and the scale was only turned in favour of — by the advantage of comparatively near neighbourhood, and by the fact of a near kinsman being an influential Governor on the Foundation. Her son had reason, in some respects, to congratulate himself on the choice. The Flemyngs came of a good old stock; though the family had never, at any epoch, been very wealthy or powerful. Vincent's appearance—at least, at this time of his life—was much in his favour: he was not only a handsome specimen of the 'pretty page' class; but showed blood in all his points, from head to heel. The future cottonocrats and coal-owners began, almost at once, to cherish—if not to court—a creature evidently cast in a more delicate mould than their own. Before the first quarter was over, Vincent Flemyng could count a score or so of adherents, all older and stronger than himself; only too ready to fetch and carry for him (morally speaking), and to humour, to the uttermost, his boyish petulance and caprice. Just so, in the early decadence of French monarchy, one might have seen the *hobereaux* of his native province ministering to the insolence of some beardless court-minion—exiled, for awhile, from the royal Paradise of Sin.

So things went on, till in the last year of his school-life Vincent Flemyng did really register a substantial triumph, by winning the English Verse prize. If there was acclamation among his partisans at —, judge how it fared with the woman-kind at home. They could scarcely have made more rejoicing if their boy had carried off the Golden Violet from a congress of all the poets of the age. Kate read out the poem, over and again, to her insatiable mother; and they both agreed

that they had never heard anything so musically sonorous as those turgid decasyllables; though even an article in the 'Weekly Growler' would have sounded rhythmically harmonious—declaimed in those fresh, round, youthful tones.

One way or another, Vincent Flemyng went up to Oxford with more than ordinary *prestige*; and there, too, the chances of time and season helped to make the way comparatively smooth before him.

There are, of course, cycles and reactions in University life, no less than in the big work-day world; if they recur more rapidly in the former case, this only seems natural—comparing the span of academic existence with that of man's generations. For three years immediately preceding Flemyng's matriculation, there had prevailed at Ch. Oh. a hard-riding, hard-drinking set; much given to athletics of all sorts, and not a little to rough practical joking. These men carried their faults and failings openly, at least; and, though they vexed the soul of the Dons with many misdeeds, perhaps even to the worst of the lot, the formula of a famous horse-dealer might have been applied—"Light-hearted beggars; without an ounce of vice about them." This set had gradually died out; a few of its members having finished their appointed course; more—having come to violent academical ends. The Tufts and Velvet-caps, who fell naturally into the vacant high places, formed, in every respect, the strongest contrast to their predecessors.

Muscularity—Christian or otherwise—went utterly out of fashion; Della Cruscan indolence and elegant cynicism were affected rather by these beardless Coldstreams; who, before they had well glanced into the world's crater, were ready to aver that "There was nothing in it." If in anywise they departed from their rule of Quietism, it was only in the elaborate ornamentation of their rooms; and, even here, show was made quite subordinate to costliness. The time-honoured hunting scenes and 'Pets' of all sorts were a perfect drug in the market; but the demand for (so-called) rare and curious engravings was sufficient to start a new and enterprising print-seller. On the morning of a very special fixture of the Heythrop or Old Berkshire, you might perchance see three or four

'pinks' lounging slowly forth past the scandalized porter; evidently careless as to the chances of being late for the meet: but usually a dilatory constitutional, late in the afternoon, was about the hardest work of the clever hacks that most of these men owned. The Drag and The Bullingdon both languished in their respective seasons; and were scarcely, by force of tradition, kept from utter extinguishment. No rattling choruses, or discordant horns, or salvos of pyrotechnic artillery, disturbed the midnight propriety of the inner quadrangle; if lights burned later than ever in those silent rooms, where oak was sported so early, that was, surely, only the affair of their tenants.

Indeed—though it was part of their creed to ignore politely all laws, human or divine—it was rare that any one of the set contravened openly the college regulations. Nevertheless, as time went on, evil whispers got abroad. It was noticed that the old set, after their noisiest orgies, never wore such haggard morning-faces as certain of the Quietists, after the decorous revels, wherein nothing stronger than iced sherbet or the mildest Badminton was consumed; also, there were rumours—still more vague—of a case or two in the neighbourhood of the city much blacker than the average of academic profligacies. It was long before such reports reached the ears of the authorities, in any tangible shape; but some of the more clear-sighted tutors—wise and moderate men, yet carrying their ideas of duty beyond the doors of a lecture-room—felt an uneasy consciousness of an unhealthy state of things, and were inclined to wish the Roysterers back again, in the room of the Deadly Smooths.

Yet—whatever the leaders might have been—it would have been unfair to impute to the generality of the set a deliberate vice, or indeed anything worse than boyish affectation. In truth—as is the wont with budding philosophers of any school—they took a one-sided view of their favourite models. They forgot the strong daring manhood, which has lain at the bottom of the fantastic follies of hero-coxcombs in every age. Taking, for instance, the prototype of all the class; they thought of Alcibiades—curled, odorous, and purple-clad—walking daintily

through the Agora, or leaning on Timandra's breast; never remembering how often he had borne the brunt of battle, from the day when Socrates bore him out of the rout, to that winter's night when he leapt out to meet his murderers, his long hair all a-flame; when they—being two hundred to one—dared not wait the onset, but, standing afar off, wrought the bidding of Pharnabazus with Bactrian bows.

Into this set—partly from bent of character, partly from family connections—Vincent Flemyng fell quite easily and naturally: very soon, indeed, he began to be reckoned amongst its chiefs; though—comparing his resources and expectations with those of most of his familiars—it was the old story repeated, of earthenware floating alongside of iron. There was a pleasant fiction current among the Quietists, to the effect, that each and every one of their number was capable of almost anything, if he only chose to try. Ere long, it began to be whispered abroad that Flemyng did choose, and that he meant going in seriously for honours. In those days, Moderations were unknown; Smalls—the only trial stakes before the great race for three-year-olds—told no tales. Thus, so many horses started dark, that it was no wonder if some rank impostors were made hot favourites and enjoyed a vast amount of prospective fame, up to the very hour when they were proved worthless.

It is very difficult to choke off university partisanship, and nowhere else can so much credit be established on hearsay. When Vincent Flemyng went in for the Newdegate, and failed, his backers were disgusted, but not discouraged; they laid the fault anywhere but at the right door; and the unconscious examiners were accused of every species of judicial delinquency, from bad taste down to prejudice and supineness.

Nevertheless, in any assemblage of true believers there will be found a sprinkling of covert or avowed heretics. If Flemyng's own tutor was beguiled into over-confidence by the showy scholarship and imperturbable self-reliance of his pupil, others were more sceptical.

The Earl of Tantallon was at the same college, training coolly and sedulously for the political career, in which he has

long ago won great fame; he was too cold and proud—perhaps, too busy—to identify himself with any especial set; but he saw a good deal of Vincent Flemyng, and heard more. Whenever the latter's name was mentioned admiringly, the Earl's fine eyebrows would arch themselves; and his thin upper-lip would curl slightly; incredulity could not be more politely or more decidedly implied, as many a baffled diplomatist has since had occasion to acknowledge.

Taking almost the other extremity of the social scale; there was Jock Hazeldean,—son of a Cumbrian sheep-farmer; with the spirit of Porson, in the carcase of Kinmont Willie—who read and rowed, and drank (by fits and starts) harder than any man of his year: he would pitch Aristotle into a corner, and put on the gloves for ten minutes, whenever he could find a customer; and return, to floor the Stagyrite, with equal science and satisfaction. The big Borderer could in nowise abide the Quietists; and utterly declined to believe in their champion: it was hardly safe to sound his praises in that savage presence. Jock would begin to glower; and shake his shaggy black head like a bull preparing to charge; and growl out, in his roughest burr:—"He be d—d. Saft, arl through!"—or words equally rude and disparaging.

Now both these men had some right to speak; for both took the highest classical honours the year before Flemyng went in. The peer's was a good, steady, laborious First; Hazeldean's—one of the most brilliant on record. His *viva-voce* translation of certain tough bits in Aristophanes is still talked of in the schools; he had mastered the passages so completely that he was able actually to appreciate their humour; and, when the laughing examiner put him on repeatedly, it was as much to gratify Jock as the Dons who crowded the gallery.

Well—it was all over now; no room left for hopes, or fears, or prophecies, or for excuses: truth to speak, the backers of the favourite had not even the old poor consolation—'he was beaten, not disgraced;' for they had not even a fair run for their money.

Some men, under similar circumstances, would have brazened out their discomfiture; others—more rare stoics, these—would have accepted it with utter outward indifference. But

Vincent Flemyng was not audacious, nor—in spite of natural and assumed *poco-curanteism*—cool enough, to take either of these courses. He left Oxford by an early train on the morning after the Class-list was published, and all the previous evening had secluded himself in his own rooms; declining to see the face of either friend or foe. He had had time enough, though, to learn—or re-learn—his lesson, during his journey into Marlshire.

So, when Seyton first saw his face, the old languid superciliousness was there; though it might be a shade paler than usual.

“How are you, Vincent? I’m glad you’ve come straight here; though I’m right sorry for the cause. Perhaps you don’t care to talk about it just now?”

Tom spoke cheerily and heartily, as was his wont; yet, somehow, as the two shook hands, even a stranger might have guessed there was little cordiality between them.

“Thanks,” Vincent answered. “You’re always very kind. But there’s little enough to tell; and that little I was trying to explain to my mother. I was very unlucky in my papers.”

“So Kate said: but she didn’t seem quite to know how that came about.”

The other man’s face lowered and darkened: he did not fancy being cross-questioned, even when it was easier to answer than now.

“It’s simple enough,” he said, after a second’s hesitation. “The examiner who set the logic and science papers is at daggers-drawn with my tutor; they’re always quarrelling: he took good care to puzzle Leighton’s pupils.”

“And were all his pupils equally unlucky?”

Seyton could not for his life refrain from that awkward home-question; but he was sorry he had spoken, before the words were well uttered; for he saw that the maternal martyr was already calling Heaven to witness against his unsympathetic hardness of heart. Indeed, under ordinary circumstances, that good dame—though she loved him as her own child—had a way of looking at Tom as if he were one of her many trials.

Vincent Flemyng had a certain facility of excuse and eva-

sion; but the gentle instincts that were born with him were strong and vivid still: he had never in his life told a direct lie. So he answered, now, straightforwardly enough; though the slow, sullen syllables came, one by one, through his set teeth.

"Leighton had one First, and three Seconds."

Then came rather an embarrassing pause, during which Mrs Flemvng's hand stole into her son's and drew him gently down to his old place by her side; while Tom felt more guilty than ever.

"Some horses can win under any weight," he muttered at last, half apologetically. "Well, I daresay there *is* a good deal of luck in these things. I didn't mean to worry you, Vincent; but I'll leave you to the Madre again now. I've several things to do before dinner, and the dressing-bell will ring in ten minutes. They'll make you comfortable, of course, in your old room."

So Seyton took himself off to his own den, with the pleasant conviction of having utterly mismanaged the first interview.

"I muffed the whole thing, Kate," he said. The kind little woman forbore to ask him another question.

Dinner went off much better than could be expected; but the ladies had scarcely left the room, when that unlucky Tom—whose evil star was ominously high that evening—contrived to bring on a fresh *imbroglio*.

"What are your plans, Vincent?" he asked, innocently; wishing to give the conversation a turn, quite away from the recent troubles.

"I shall go to Rome almost immediately," was the answer; "and stay there some months, at least. I've been thinking—yes—before this week—of taking up painting as a profession. It would suit me as well or better than any other, I daresay."

The vague recklessness of the reply—to say nothing of a subtle contemptuousness of tone—grated unpleasantly on Seyton's ear. Besides this, he was not free from certain old-fashioned prejudices. Admiring both art and literature in his simple way, he could not divest himself of the idea that the professors of either must be more or less affiliated to the Brotherhood of

Bohemia. He drew his lips together; evidently suppressing with difficulty the long low whistle that always, with him, betokened vexation and surprise.

"You know your own mind best, of course," he said, after a pause, "and your chance of success, too; but surely it's a pity you didn't think of all this two or three years sooner. It might have saved much time, and—money. Look here, Vincent; I haven't said a word to the Madre (though perhaps it's more her affair than mine), nor to Kate either; but Deacon told me, when I saw him in town, that you had been selling out heavily within the last six months. He didn't say how much, and I didn't ask him; but it was enough to make him look very grave. I do hope, it was to settle *all* the Oxford ticks. I know they mount up, like the very devil, at the end of the third year; and, no doubt, it's wisest to clear everything off at a sweep."

Vincent Flemyng felt very angry—too angry to preserve his habitual supercilious *sang-froid*—too angry to avail himself of the avenue of escape left in his brother-in-law's last words. As he spoke, he crushed a walnut to shivers in the crackers, with a vicious emphasis that could not be mistaken.

"Deacon's an old fool, and an old woman into the bargain; or he wouldn't talk of his client's affairs to the people whom they can't in the least concern. I shall get some one else to manage my business in future. I don't choose to be questioned on matters for which I am accountable to no one alive. It will be time enough to trouble my mother, when I ask her for money."

Tom Seyton had an invariably good temper. He was also specially indulgent to the irritations of sorrow or adversity; and had the highest idea of courtesy at his own table; but—with all this given in—it was hardly safe to abuse an absent friend in his presence.

"You're not yourself just now," he said, sternly. "Yet that's no excuse for words like these. Deacon *is* an old man—old enough to have known your father and mine, and to have been trusted implicitly by both. But there's not an honester heart, nor a clearer head, within a mile round Lincoln's Inn. I don't think the threat of withdrawing your business would frighten him. He'll throw it up of his own accord, if you give him much more

of such work to do. Perhaps he is rather behind the world, though ; for it never struck him, when talking to your sister's husband, that he was talking to an outside stranger."

Tom checked himself here, with a valiant effort (for he was in a very unusual heat of temper) ; and went on in a much milder tone.

" Well—don't let us quarrel, Vincent. If it's only for the women's sake, we're bound to keep the peace. Of course you're out of leading-strings long ago. I only spoke as I would have done to any other old friend of mine ; and because I'd do a good deal to save you from getting into trouble ; and more still—I tell you frankly—to save sorrow to your mother or sister. But I'm fated to put my foot into it. If you won't have any more claret, shall we go into the library ? Kate has hardly had a glimpse of you yet."

Now—though Flemyng had carried the thing off with rather a high hand, and had not had much the worst of it in that brief passage of arms—it did occur to him, when the first petulance of anger had passed away, that it might have been wiser to take Seyton's hints in the spirit in which they were evidently offered. He had no present or pressing embarrassments to fear ; nevertheless—bluster and brazen it as he would—he could not shake off the stubborn fact, that a huge cantle of his patrimony had gone, to pay off play-debts, incurred in a few of those ' quiet ' evenings above alluded to ; leaving the majority of the trade-accounts still unsettled.

On entering the library, Seyton made straight for his own peculiar arm-chair ; and took, as it were, a ' header ' into the pages of a famous sporting serial, that had arrived in the course of the day ; he did not come fairly to the surface during the remainder of the evening. It was an unusually interesting number ; narrating how the hero, on that notorious savage The Cannibal, utterly vanquished and cut down the cracks of Roundaboutshire ; and—after selling his mount for a fabulous sum to one of the flyers of the hunt—won back the animal, with a hatful of money besides, at chicken-hazard. Nevertheless, these stirring adventures did not so entirely engross the reader, as to make him insensible to two separate aggravations.

The first was, a consciousness that those three talking low at the farther end of the library, had not—for the moment—one single feeling in common with him, Tom Seyton. To be sure, Kate did, ever and anon, cast certain conversational scraps in his direction; but this was, evidently, more to prevent her husband from feeling himself entirely an alien and outsider (perhaps, too, a little to ease her own conscience), than because she wanted or expected him to join them. The second thorn in Seyton's side was this. He had his own opinion, as you know, as to how far Fortune was to blame in the recent disaster. So, it was sufficiently provoking to be aware that the victim was being loaded with about the same amount of pity and comfort and cherishment, as might fairly be awarded to some valiant invalid, who has brought back wealth of bloody honours from a fair-foughten field.

On the whole, it was one of the least remunerative evenings that Tom ever spent at his own fireside; nor was it great wonder if, rather before his usual hour, he betook himself to his own den; where Kate—more than half contrite now—found him, shrouded in smoke-wreaths, dense enough to make their brief peace-making almost an invisible performance.

CHAPTER VII.

MORNING BRINGS COUNSEL.

Then sleep on, my baby,
And rest while you may,
For strife comes with waking,
And sorrow with day.

So, if I remember aright, ran the lullaby that I once heard crooned over a cradle. It seems to me to contain more of false sentiment than is allowable, even in nursery rhymes. If the night has closed upon some bitter sorrow, a gross folly, or black disaster, the first waking moments are, in themselves, half an

atonement ; but these moments must have been exceptional even in *his* life, on whose sepulchre was graven the one ghastly word—*MISERRIMUS*. Few there are, of sound mind and body, who will not own that there is no such moral tonic as a morning breaking freshly and brightly. Every one knows the ending of Longfellow's ballad, that begins—

I have read in some old marvellous tale,
Some legend old and vague,
How a legion of spectres, wan and pale,
Besiege the walls of Prague.

The gentle poet-philosopher never drew an apter or truer parallel.

Tom Seyton would have felt almost as much ashamed of waking sad or sorry, as of waking with a racking headache ; either must have been induced by an excess over-night of one kind or another, and Tom was more temperate than most of his convivial turn. He had nearly forgotten the small crosses and vexations of the previous evening, when he came down to his early breakfast ; indeed, Kate, albeit well used to minister to his appetite, could not forbear bantering her husband on his remarkable prowess that morning. Not very often, between August and April, was Seyton present at the first family meal ; which was at Warleigh rather an irregular and uncertain affair, determined much by the individual tastes of the guests. Mrs Flemyng always breakfasted late, and disliked breakfasting alone : so Kate humoured her mother, of course ; though she would much have preferred sharing Tom's grill, instead of simply pouring out his tea.

Seyton had not much time to spare on this particular morning ; for Wrotham Lings, where he was bound to shoot, lay twelve long miles away ; and the owner of that famous cover considered its annual beating in the light of a solemn festival or sacrifice, to which only a few favoured initiates were bidden : if one of these had been a minute late, of a surety he would that hour have lost his grade, and been reduced to the ranks of the outer profane for ever. Nevertheless, Tom did manage to appear in the breakfast-room, just as Vincent Flemyng lounged listlessly

through the opposite door—with the air of a man who has no interest whatever in what is set before him; and considers appetite rather a plebeian weakness.

“You won’t mind my leaving you?” Seyton asked, as soon as the greetings were over (rather prolonged on the part of the sister and mother). “Kate can do the honours of the stable just as well as I; you can ride anything that’s fit, of course. You don’t hunt, so it’s of less consequence that the hounds are the other side of the country to-day. But it’s a pity you don’t care for shooting; it would be such a rare day for the warren, and we’ve hardly put a ferret in yet. Won’t you take Haynes there, for an hour or two?”

Vincent Flemyng turned on his brother-in law his wonted look of supercilious languor; yet a keen observer might have detected in his glance a covert scrutiny.

“Thanks, very much,” he said; “but the warren won’t tempt me. I should be glad, though, if you could lend me a quiet hack—warranted not to pull. I rather think of going over to Charteris Royal.”

They were insignificant words enough, and very negligently spoken; but eyes less watchful than Kate’s might have seen a doubt and trouble cloud her husband’s face; his assent came, after a pause, with undissembled reluctance.

“You can ride the Kitten, of course; and I’ll answer for her giving you no trouble. But it’s a longish pull from here, and you can’t get back till after dark. Or, stay—if you must go, won’t you take Kate with you? She owes them a call, I know.”

Vincent Flemyng’s smooth white brow could lower sullenly enough if anything thwarted his humour; such was evidently the case just now. But Kate struck in with the ready partisanship of womanhood, before her brother could answer.

“That’s so like you, Tom. I never knew you remember any except shooting engagements. You forget that the Martyns come here to luncheon to-day, though *you* asked them. I shall have to do a long hour’s penance for your flirtations with that tremendous florist, while she criticises my poor conservatory. As for the ride—it’s not a bit farther for Vincent than

it would be for me; and what has the dark got to do with it? I'm sure he knows every inch of the road."

Among other characteristics of the female special-pleader, you may remark that, if part of her case be rather weak or suspicious, she is fond of bringing in—more or less irrelevantly—certain truisms or incontrovertible propositions. In this target, if her antagonist be not exceeding cunning of fence, the fair gladiator will catch several thrusts that would be hard to parry with her blade.

There was sense in Kate's remark, certainly; indeed, in her last words there was rather a redundancy of truth. And so her husband seemed to think, as he muttered below his breath—

"Yes, there's no doubt of that: he knows the road well enough; a turn *too* well, for that matter."

Luckily for the peace of the community, not even Kate's quick ear caught the sense of the murmur; and, while Tom paused, still somewhat irresolute, Mrs Flemyng's gentle plaintive voice was heard.

"I'm very glad you are going over to Charteris, Vincent, dear. I've two or three messages to send to Marion, besides a monogram for her velvet-work. I think the young men of this day are far too apt to be idle about calling, and to forget their old friends. *You'll* never follow that fashion, darling, I'm sure."

And the excellent lady glanced around her—a ray of satisfaction beaming through the habitual twilight of meek long-suffering—as who should say—

"See: among my many trials, I am still alive to the comfort of having borne a considerate and high-principled son."

Honest Tom Seyton could hold his own well enough with the outer world; but in the bosom of his own family he was essentially non-combatant. Seeing the state of the odds against him, he utterly declined further contest; and gave up the point with an expressive shrug of his broad shoulders—as he had given up many another.

All this time, you will observe that the person principally interested in the question had spoken never a word. The reason was simple enough. "Do nothing for yourself that

others will do for you"—was one of the prime tenets of Flem-yng's life-law. So soon as he perceived that his sister and mother were ready to fight his battle, it no more occurred to him to interfere, than it would have occurred to our Iron Duke to lead the stormers at Badajoz. Nor was he in anywise grateful for the timely succour: he had come to think that it was the duty—if not the privilege—of his womankind to take all possible trouble off his own imperial hands; accepting such service as a matter of course, with the impassible serenity of a Cheddar dairy-farmer, or Sioux brave.

So Vincent sate silent, and somewhat sullen, till Seyton's face showed plainly enough that no further opposition was to be feared: then he came, languidly, to the front again.

"Well, I suppose it's settled then? As I've rather a fancy for going to Charteris Royal to-day, and as it seems to please mamma, and as you're sure the Kitten will carry me safely, Tom,—perhaps you'll be kind enough to order her, when you start? I should like to get over there by luncheon-time. Of course, I'd rather have had Kate's company; but, it seems that's out of the question."

He smiled as he spoke; and the low soft voice inherited from his mother sounded musically; yet, both in voice and smile, there was overmuch of sneer.

There was something so intensely cool in the way in which the speaker took everything for granted, that Seyton, in the midst of his vexation, was almost moved to laughter.

"You've settled it among you, certainly," he said. "After all, Vincent, if you choose to take a long, lonely ride, it's more your affair than mine. There's the cart coming round; I've not another minute to spare. I'll order the Kitten for you in an hour; for Heaven's sake, take care of her knees. Kate—I want to say three words to you before I start."

No stronger proof could be given of Tom's inward discontent, than that simple caution. He was fond of his horses, but liberal to a fault in lending them.

Amicus equus, sed magis amicus hospes;

might have been carved over his stable door. Now—perhaps

for the first time in his life—he mounted a guest with a warning. His last words to Kate in the hall were brief enough; but spoken with a grave earnestness, very unusual with Tom Seyton.

“See, child—I don’t want to be uncharitable. I hate scandal as I do the devil; and I’m the last man alive to spoil fair sport. But I don’t think all the fooling that went on over yonder last autumn comes under that head. If it’s to begin again, I’ll have neither lot nor part therein. You needn’t tell me ‘there’s no real harm in it.’ It’s harm enough—to set all the idle tongues in the country going.”

Dearly as Kate loved her husband, and careful as she was never deliberately to run counter to his will, she was rather disposed to under-estimate his capacity; and scarcely gave credit enough to the strong, clear, common-sense that rarely led him astray. In trifling debates she was apt to side with the opposition, till she saw that Tom was seriously interested; on appreciating which state of things, she would ‘rat’ with a promptitude rarely equalled, even in domestic politics.

To do her justice, she had not considered the present question as one of any real moment whatever. Not till her husband spoke these last few words, did she understand that his scruples and apprehensions were fairly roused: all at once, in spite of her hero-worship of Vincent, it flashed across her that Tom might possibly be right after all.

Her heart smote her as she answered, with a nervous laugh; looking up, the while, into her husband’s eyes rather anxiously.

“You dear old goose! I hope you are talking of what you know nothing about. But I’m so sorry you’re vexed. If I had only known, you——”

Seyton cut the contrition short, after his usual fashion; and the light was on his face again, as he bent it to the farewell salute.

“Don’t worry, pet,” he said, cheerily. “Perhaps I’m disquieting myself, and you, all in vain. But Vincent is past boyhood now; and the fair lady, yonder, has very little prudence—or principle either, I fancy—inside her handsome head; and John Charteris has neither hands nor nerve to drive

a skittish one—even if he would take the trouble to try. It's just as well Vincent is going to Italy. Mrs Charteris will have some one else on hand before he has been gone a month—that's one comfort. Meanwhile, I wish him luck with his adieus, and I hope he'll get them over quickly."

Tom's foot was on the hall-steps as he spoke the last words, and in two minutes more he had turned the bend of the avenue. It is most certain that he carried no troublesome misgivings with him; for he had never been in better spirits nor in better shooting form than he was on that day—a red letter one, even for Wrotham Lings. His performance at one especial corner—where he stood side by side with a famous shot from the North-country, in a hollow that gave the rocketers good twenty yards' advantage—astonished the stranger not less than it gratified the natives.

But Kate watched her husband rather wistfully till he was quite out of sight: as she turned into the house she sighed once, audibly; and the shiver that ran through her pretty shoulders came not all from the keenness of the winter air.

An hour later, Vincent Flemyng, attired in riding gear a thought too gorgeous for winter travel, took the road, carrying his mother's commissions, and her tacit blessing. Not seldom—if history speak sooth—have as eminent Christians wished a worse errand 'God-speed.'

While the Kitten bears him smoothly and swiftly over fifteen miles of dreary level road, it may be well to say a few words concerning Charteris Royal and its tenants.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHARTERIS ROYAL

FOR many and many a year has that great house stood in the foremost rank of the stately homes of England. The county Gazetteer (though the estate stretches far into Marlshire, the mansion is pitched a long league over the Chalkshire border) soars into eloquence whilst dilating on the glories of the demesne, and the treasures of the galleries and state-rooms. Yet, a critically artistic eye would find little to rest on admiringly. The park is vast enough, certainly; it has never been contracted since the day (*vide* the Gazetteer again) Queen Bess coursed a stag for two full hours within the boundary-wall; but it has few natural advantages, save a wealth of immemorial trees; for the flat Marlshire champaign encroaches here on the neighbouring county to the verge of the far horizon.

Neither is there anything especially imposing about the mansion itself; though it is placed judiciously enough on the likeliest swell of rising ground, and backed by a darkling mass of woodland. There are some houses—some men and women too—that even length of years cannot make venerable. Charteris Royal was one of these. Without, the eye of the antiquary roved over a huge heavy pile of Gothic architecture, till it grew satiate and weary; without lighting on a single coign of relief, where some quaint delicate fancy of the builder had come out, in contrast with the solemn grandeur of his plan. And so it was within-doors: portraits, and landscapes, and battle-scenes, and hunting-groups, by the hundred, covered every yard of wall; and every available corner held a statue; but there was scarcely a masterpiece among them. There were a few good enamels, and many specimens of rare old china; these, for the most part, were to be found in apartments where the vulgar public could never hope to penetrate. There were priceless treasures, too, in the wire-guarded book shelves of the vast

library; but the wandering bibliophile was fain to take these on trust, for a maddening glimpse through the crimson curtains of the doorway was all that the implacable cicerone would allow. The furniture, except in one or two of the state-rooms, was entirely modern.

On the whole, most visitors, after making the grand tour of the mansion, issued into the air with the weary satisfaction of men who have accomplished a long set task; mingled with a vague, guilty craving for instant bodily refreshment, in the shape of ardent drink. Whoso has plodded through the palace of Versailles, will, I think, appreciate and excuse such a frailty.

But the gardens were simply superb, and fully deserved their fame; not more on account of their extent and varied character, than for the extraordinary care with which they were tended—care which had, evidently, not been intermitted for generations. Every foot of all those square miles of turf was trim and smooth-shaven as a bowling-green, even in obscure nooks and corners, where no foot of sojourner or stranger was ever likely to wander.

Leaning over the broad marble balustrade of the terrace overlooking the Italian garden, you began to realize more fully than you yet had done, that this was the dwelling-place of a family that for centuries could have known no ruinous reverse, but must ever have been waxing in prosperity, if not in honour.

This was absolutely true of the Charterises of Charteris Royal. No change or violence of political winds had been able to wreck, or seriously damage, the stout and stately argosy freighted with their fortunes; it weathered the two fiercest tempests that have laid England desolate, without starting a plank, or parting a rope-strand.

In the War of the Roses, the family espoused the winning side, and reaped therefrom no small advantage. The head of the house was playing at soldiers in his nursery, when the cannon were roaring on Marston Moor: his mother and guardian—cousin of the MacCallum More, and wily as she was proud—(her hard handsome face fronts you as you enter the north gallery) contrived to temporize, without absolutely truckling

to the Protector, or betraying her loyalty ; so that when the king came to his own again, she and her young son were able to ruffle it as bravely as the best, with consciences as clear as their rent-roll.

Since then, one Charteris after another, in direct unbroken lineage, had succeeded to that goodly heritage ; and each had added to it, acre by acre, whenever a fair chance presented itself. They were a sober, God-fearing race ; just and charitable in the main ; coveting no man's goods, and never meddling oppressively with their neighbour's land-mark ; but the absorbent process—if slow—was not less sure : there were curiously few small holdings, within fifteen miles round Charteris Royal.

The head of the family usually sate in Parliament, as knight of his shire ; placing his pocket-borough at the disposal of the Chief—for the time being—of the old-fashioned Whig party. The cadets went forth into the different professions—the army or navy, for choice—and served their country decently in their own honest hum-drum fashion. No Charteris ever sate in the Cabinet, or on the Law Bench : only one was thrust upwards by the force of interest, till he dozed among the bishops : the chronicle of English worthies—in art, or arms, or song—almost absolutely ignore the name. But, if they achieved no notable renown, they seldom fell into any grave disgrace or disaster. The black sheep that occasionally varied the cleanly monotony of the fruitful fold, were so few and far between, that it was easy to slur over their names ; such gradually sunk below the surface of the general respectability, and their place knew them no more.

In their vices, the Charterises never forgot the old monastic maxim—

Si non castè, cautè tamen ;

and even in their follies, they were methodical. For example, Squire Christopher, in whose time the present huge mansion arose, almost as it now stands, was afflicted from his youth upwards with a building-mania ; but he restrained himself, till he had wedded a very wealthy wife ; and then indulged his tastes at the expense of the unsettled portion of her fortune, without loading his patrimony with a single mortgage.

Most of the family peculiarities above alluded to were reproduced in the present representative of the name. John Aylmer Charteris was by no means a popular character. People called him proud, pompous, overbearing, stiff-necked, and a dozen hard names besides. He was simply a cautious, cold-blooded man; incapable of acting on impulse; singularly undemonstrative, even when most strongly moved; quite alive to the advantages of his position, but still more keenly alive to its duties; these he tried honestly to fulfil without fear or favour; dealing, intentionally, no harder measure to others than he would have dealt to himself. If he was proud, he was proud of his station only. The veriest cynic alive could hold his own personal merits of no less account than did John Charteris. He was just as plain and unpretending in every one of his tastes, as in his outward appearance and attire. But, by a simple train of exhaustive reasoning, he had come to consider his own domain as the very centre-point of the universe. He argued thus—"The first country of the world is England; the first county in England is Chalkshire; and the first property in Chalkshire is Charteris Royal."

Of this important trust he held himself to be practically only the steward, as his ancestors had been; and, whenever he stood stiffly on his dignity, he believed himself to be only discharging one of the duties of that state of life to which it had pleased Providence to call him.

Though half the match-makers in England were hard upon his track, John Charteris never seriously thought of marriage till he was long past thirty; when his father's death put him in possession of the family honours. As soon as the days of mourning were expired, he betook himself to a certain cousin—a discreet and honourable matron, well versed in matters matrimonial—and bade her provide him with a suitable wife; by which he meant to imply, a maiden of blameless repute and ancient lineage; such an one as would be likely to beautify the head of his table, and bear an heir to Charteris Royal.

The good dame had only her kinsman's interest at heart; so it is hard to say why her choice fell upon that special

Penniless lass wi' a long pedigree :

for there, certainly, ended the parallel between the selected bride and the decent, sponable damsel, whom the Laird of Cockpen went forth to woo.

Marion Delancy was the fourth child, and eldest daughter, of a disreputable Irish baron; whose ambition it seemed to be to illustrate in his own person the wild traditions of two generations back, when the 'strong blood' of the Tribes found vent in setting God and man at defiance. He gave his children food, and raiment, and shelter—such as his roving life would furnish; but his notions of paternal obligations ended here; for their training, mental and moral, he had neither heed nor care.

Marion grew up amongst her brethren with no more educational advantages than fell to their share; these were about as great as would be bestowed on the lads in any well-regulated training-stable. She must have passed into womanhood a helpless hoyden, had it not been for an aunt who took her in charge when she was fifteen, partly compassionating her forlorn condition; partly anticipating possible profit to herself from the beauty, which, even then, promised wonders. But it was too late to give the girl anything beyond a few superficial accomplishments; just enough to give her a fair start in the social race, and to enable her to hold her own in *banale* conversation. Luckily, Marion had a keen natural wit; and tact enough to stop when she was getting beyond her depth, before she began to flounder ungracefully: if she did make a mistake, her pleasant voice and enticing eyes often made her audience laugh with, instead of at, the blunderer. Be this as it might—her *début* was an unquestionable success; the Wild Irish Girl did not take the town more completely by storm. People were good-natured enough to identify her rather with her chaperone,—a dame of unimpeached reputation, though a veteran schemer,—than with her scape-grace sire; and doors, as a rule jealously guarded, opened wide to welcome her beauty. Rare beauty it assuredly was, though of a peculiar type.

Had this tale been written five years ago, one would have apologized for painting one's heroine *rousse*; in these days of Rachaelesque be-devilments, such excuse would certainly be wasted.

Whilst we are on the subject, let me confess that, only with an

effort, do I refrain from uplifting my testimony against this last vagary of our womanhood. I will simply remark—not intending an unsavoury parallel, but rather interjecting a pious *Absit omen*—that the epoch, when the auri-comal mania most notoriously prevailed, was in the days when a certain Messalina led the fashions in Imperial Rome ;

Nigrum flavo crinem abscondente galero.

And those ingenious white-washers, who have made a martyr of Catiline, and a philanthropist of Robespierre, have not yet seen fit to set up that august lady as an example for our wives and sisters to follow.

So—without more preamble—let us avow that no flattery could have called the gorgeous masses of hair, that seemed too weighty a load for the small head and slender neck, chestnut, or auburn, or golden, or—anything but a rich, unmitigated red. Yet, even in those days, no one thought of instancing this as a defect in her beauty. It rather seemed to soften the outline of features, that might otherwise have been too severe in their Grecian purity. There was a want of shade, certainly, in the faint pencillings of the brows ; but *en revanche*, the lashes were dark and heavy, matching well with melting eyes of the deep Irish grey.

Marion Charteris was now in her twenty-sixth year ; so far, rather slight than grandly developed in figure ; yet she carried off an unusually lofty stature right royally. She had certainly fulfilled the chief condition that, as was aforesaid, her husband had in view, when—by deputy—he first sought her hand. She had borne him a sturdy heir, and a second son besides ; as though to guard against contingent failure of issue. She presided at his great ceremonious feasts ; looking like a masterpiece of Tintoretto in the gorgeous apparel that she loved to wear—and with reason ; for even her enemies allowed that Mrs Charteris could stand a combination of colour, that on other women would have appeared tawdry and vulgar, if it had not made their beauty seem pale and wan.

Nevertheless, there were many who—not being over captious or censorious as a rule—scrupled not to affirm that Lady Syndale had committed the prime error of her match-making career in electing this brilliant dame to rule over her cousin's household.

Marion was inexcusably rash and reckless, at times—to say the least of it; so much so, indeed, that her partisans were wont to make this a great point in her favour; arguing, with some show of plausibility, that any one who could afford thus absolutely to dispense with outward forms of precaution, must have very little wrong intention to conceal. She flirted, quite as outrageously and openly, as her sworn friend and ally, Laura Brancepeth. But there was this difference between them. The last-named coquette was much more indiscriminate in her sport; and would count half-a-dozen ‘cripples’ around her in the course of an evening’s flight-shooting, without one clean-killed bird; whereas Marion rather resembled Cooper’s veteran hunter, who, when he wanted a mallard, slew it, stone-dead, with a single bullet from Killdeer.

With all her imprudence, the mistress of Charteris Royal was no remiss or uncourteous *châtelaine*. She had plenty of tact, as has been said above, when she chose to use it; and knew better than to neglect—much less discomfit—any one of her husband’s friends; indeed, sometimes, she seemed more solicitous about their comforts and amusements than about those of her own intimates, who were almost all of the fast set *par excellence*. Perhaps she thought these last were fully capable of taking care of themselves.

All this while John Charteris plodded on the decent tenour of his way; caring not a whit for any of these things. His wife’s appearance would have done credit to an establishment, even more magnificent than his own; he never expressed a decided wish, that she did not carry out readily and promptly; he always found her perfectly good-tempered, and sufficiently interested in his favourite plans to be able to sympathize on their success or miscarriage; and she was ever specially attentive to such guests as he himself delighted to honour. Recognizing all this—not without sober self-congratulation—John Charteris expected nothing more.

During the brief wooing, which was transacted mainly by proxy, he had not thought it necessary to simulate devotion to his *fiancée*; nor, since their marriage, had he ever paid her more attention than courtesy and kindness demanded. But—had he loved her as his own soul—he could not have trusted her more implicitly. In spite of all the perils that were sure to beset the

path of a beautiful, heedless woman, ever 'too much alone'—perils that a more obtuse man could hardly have ignored—there never had crossed his mind the glimmer of a suspicion that Marion could possibly go astray. It is true that the world had never accused her of anything more than folly, and perhaps heartlessness; but—had evil reports been rife, and John Charteris been compelled to interfere—he would have done so only to save the family credit and dignity from vulgar aspersion.

As things stood, he would far sooner have thought of begrudging his wife her amusements than of stinting his son in his play-hours.

On that same child, be it observed, John Charteris had bestowed all the natural affection that it was given to his cold stolid nature to feel. People said that, had the heir been suddenly removed, his brother would soon have been set up on the same pedestal in the father's heart; but this was the merest matter of speculation.

Now, you know enough of the mansion and its inmates, before you follow yon gay gallant under the ponderous portal-arch of Charteris Royal.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAMP CLOS.

THERE was only a small party in the house just then; and all the men folk, with one exception, were out cover-shooting. John Charteris had business at home that morning, and had no intention of joining the others till after luncheon. Like almost all intensely respectable men, gifted with good digestion and not given to field sports, he much affected a heavy mid-day meal.

It seemed to Flemyng that the other's greeting was unusually cold and constrained. This may not have been all fancy; though in the vanity of his egotism he set it down to the wrong

cause. Without being specially hard or uncharitable, Charteris was utterly incapable of sympathizing with ill success. He had a vague idea that no man, unendowed with a liberal independence, had a right to shirk the work appointed for him, or to fall ignominiously short of his set purpose. And Vincent Flemyng's attainment of high university honours had been, for a year or more, considered throughout the country-side as a fore-gone conclusion. It was rather a relief to both parties when the luncheon gong cut short cold condolences and formal inquiries; and John Charteris, with evident alacrity, led the way to the scene of action.

There, at least, the visitor had no reason to be dissatisfied with the warmth of his welcome. Had the fair *châtelaine* been aware of her husband's shortcomings in this respect, she could scarcely have made more charming amends.

Marion had never set her foot on Irish ground since early childhood; but—besides the eyes above alluded to, and a delicious suspicion of a brogue—a certain impulsiveness of manner would have told you, at once, on which side of St George's Channel she was born. People, paying the merest visit of ceremony, went away with the comfortable conviction that Mrs Charteris had taken a fancy to them at first sight; and many were afterwards oppressed with unmerited self-reproach, on finding that the acquaintance, so auspiciously commenced, never progressed another step towards real intimacy. If she comported herself thus with comparative strangers, you may guess how she would welcome a special favourite.

Nevertheless, during luncheon the discourse was confined to trivial generalities. Flemyng's recent disaster was utterly ignored; and Marion's eloquent eyes, for a while, were discreetly dumb. Before the meal was fairly over, the host went his own way—with slight and cold farewells, it must be owned; and Vincent was left, once more, to feminine consolation.

The reception-rooms at Charteris Royal were arranged thus. From the main corridor opened state-saloons, unequal in size; beyond which state-guests were not expected to penetrate. From the smaller of these presence-chambers (if you were in the inner circle) you passed into the Green Drawing-room—a pleasant

apartment enough, not too large for comfort. Some good cabinet pictures lined the tinted walls; and many small tables of marqueterie, buhl, and mosaic, were loaded with precious nick-nacks, from all climes and countries.

Beyond this, again, lay the real Gynæceum—the boudoir of the beautiful *châtelaine*; wherein, if scandal was to be trusted, she sat and wove nets to catch men's souls.

Save to a very few of either sex, it was, in truth, a sealed chamber. Many curious glances had been levelled at those mysterious portals, as they opened to give admittance or egress to one of the elect; but the keenest eye had never caught more than a rapid glance of pale blue damask and gleams of silver; for within the door, swept down a curtain of dark velvet, thick and ponderous as the *contre-vent* of a continental cathedral; impervious alike to sight and sound.

The small party at Charteris Royal, just then, was made up almost entirely of Marion's own friends. Every one knows the freemasonry that exists in such a set; it is not without its social advantages: if staid busy-bodies would imitate the tact and good nature with which the *lionnes* refrain from troubling themselves about their neighbours' concerns (so long as purposes clash not), it would save the world much disquietude, and yet not involve any connivance at crime. On the present occasion, when the *coterie* assembled in the Green Drawing-room forbore, either by word or gesture, to testify surprise or intelligence at the vanishment of two out of the midst of them, they did not consider themselves accomplices in anything beyond a very venial flirtation. But our modern court dames are far better trained than their ancestresses of Lady Heron's time; I believe they would assist at even a royal 'scuffle'—were such a thing possible in this our day—without once being tempted to laugh, or glance aside.

The famous boudoir was an irregularly-shaped hexagon, with divers nooks and recesses; of these, the one farthest from the entrance was nearly filled up by a deep broad couch, strewn with many cushions, and a very low luxurious arm-chair. Somehow—at the first glance it struck you that the last-named piece of furniture was, as it were, part and parcel of the other; just as the little fald-stool outside is inseparable from a confessional.

The sternest Puritan must needs have owned the seductive influences of the place; even had he resisted the temptation to wax amative, or, at the least, confidential. A warm, languid fragrance, in the coldest season, stole in from the winter-garden without; the murmur of an unseen fountain was just audible enough to save dead silence, if converse should halt; the sun himself could only peep in, modestly and discreetly, through a screen of giant ferns.

Mrs Charteris subsided, quite naturally, into her favourite corner among the cushions; while her companion occupied the above-mentioned *causeuse*, with the air of one resuming a familiar seat; and her eyes said,—“*Tirez le premier*”

Now Vincent Flemyng's meditations, during his long lonely ride, had been the reverse of saint-like. Other devils besides Belial had been whispering in his ear; and he was just in the mood to hearken readily

Ever since his discomfiture he had been in a restless, spiteful frame of mind,—wanting, as the populace would phrase it, ‘to take it out of *some one*.’ Like many men of his weak moral stamp, he was strangely tenacious in his resentments; he knew, well enough, that his proceedings at Charteris Royal had already made Seyton uneasy, and were likely—if persevered in—to vex him yet more. Vincent had always been vaguely jealous of his brother-in-law, though he affected pity for his good-natured rusticity: he had begun to hate him within the last twenty-four hours. Of course, this was not the chief excitement; indeed, Flemyng was, probably, not conscious of it; yet, like an extra draught of strong liquor, it was enough to make him more vicious and determined. Had it been otherwise—had he owned the motive to himself—it would not have been the first time that malice has given a spur to lagging love.

Unhappily, no such stimulus was needed here. Vincent had been much more serious in his ‘foolery’ than Tom Seyton suspected, or than Mrs Charteris—to do her justice—had any idea of. He aspired to more solid food than the light and illusory cates—sugared and perfumed though they were—with which, alone, the trained coquette seemed disposed to feed his

devotion; and fully intended, at the earliest opportunity, to wring from her a direct avowal, or to compromise her in her own esteem.

Taking all things into consideration, you will see that Vincent Flemyng meant mischief that day. He had scant time before him, too; and more than once, as he rode along, had flashed across him the terrible text—spoken on the verge of the Unpardonable Sin, and quoted by Sathanas since, perhaps oftener than any other morsel of misused Scripture—"What thou doest, do quickly."

Before he reached Charteris Royal, he had arranged in his mind a very promising programme; but, like many others that look pretty on paper, did not seem so feasible when the critical moment came.

"An ounce of practice is worth a ton of theory," said some practical philosopher of old time.

His words were true, if trite. We are apt to forget, in these erudite days, that all the science under the sun will not, under certain circumstances, compensate for the lack of promptitude, or daring, or coolness. If mimic war became a stern reality, I can fancy a certain famous and irascible commander wishing, regretfully, that he had once more at his elbow the simple, straightgoing galloper, at whose head he has so often levelled volleys of strong language; and some of the competitive cracks might show to disadvantage by the side of that gay and debonair *aide*, who, when a Russian round-shot rolled his horse over under him, arose with slow deliberation—standing still, under a *feu d'enfer*, till he had brushed off every particle of dust from his sleeve, and then returned to the shelter of the trenches with the same measured, graceful gait, that has borne him through many a morning lounge by the Rails.

Surely, the apophthegm applies, *Tam Veneri quam Marti*.

It has been stated once before that cynicism was a favourite tenet of the Quietist set. Lauzun or Casanova could scarcely have discoursed more learnedly on certain subjects than did some of these callow libertines, whose experiments, hitherto, had been made only *in corpore servili*. If you hearkened to them, they would have you believe that the siege of any virtue

whatsoever was the merest question of time and opportunity. In this discourse, Vincent Flemyng had ever been as forward as his fellows. But since he began to bask in Marion Charteris' smiles, his tone had sensibly altered; though he had the grace to refrain from any pointed or personal allusions, he spoke with the *aplomb* and authority of a passed *bachelier ès amours*.

It was provoking enough, when the moment of action came, to find his theories fail him, as better ones have failed better men; but the truth must be told. Vincent Flemyng remained silent till, for very shame, he could no longer underlie the challenge of the dark grey eyes. Then he spoke—not very much to the purpose, after all.

“You have not pitied me, yet.”

Now, in that opening, there was worse than a blunder of inexperience. The veriest novice—not an egotist into the bargain—would have known better than to make his first words of confidence, after long absence, turn on his own good or evil fortunes. Thinking over these things later, Marion Charteris appreciated the *gaucherie* as it deserved; though, for the moment, it passed unnoticed.

“I’ve done nothing else, since the bad news came,” she said, softly. “But pity bores some people so, that I didn’t like to speak of it first. Tell me how it happened.”

And he did tell her,—glozing over his own deficiencies, and laying hard blame on others; as he well knew how to do. But here, again, he won implicit credit and boundless sympathy.

“I never heard such an atrocious shame,” Mrs Charteris said; “I’ve no patience with those prim, prejudiced Dons; and they are not a bit better than the rest of us, after all. I’ve never believed in them, since we passed through Oxford, soon after we were married, and John took me to see his college; and the Master wanted to make love to me, while he was showing me founders, and martyrs, and all that kind of people. I shall never forget his long-winded compliments; nor the way he kept looking sideways out of his wicked old eyes. I’m very glad you’ve done with them all. But—poor Kate!—what a disappointment it has been to her! I am almost as sorry for her

as for you. And Mr Seyton must have been bitterly vexed, too. It was only last week we were talking about it."

Flemyng's face lowered sullenly. He was selfish enough to wish to monopolize *all* the sympathy, and to grudge the tiniest share of it to the sister who loved him so dearly; but the mention of his brother-in-law's name just then, and from those lips, chafed him sorely.

"Kate bears it well enough," he answered, rather coldly and carelessly. "As for Seyton—I can't conceive what possible interest my affairs can have for him. I wish he would not be so fond of meddling with them. *Parlons d'autre chose*. I've something more serious to say to you to-day."

Marion's handsome eyes opened, rather widely, at Flemyng's first words, for their bitterness fairly puzzled her; but, as he spoke the last, they settled into a look of demure expectation, beneath which sparkled a gleam of covert amusement. In very truth, what had she to fear—with her five years in hand, and the experience of a score such 'passages' to aid her?

Vincent paused awhile, as if to give fuller effect to his communication. Then he said, with some solemnity—"I start for Rome next week; it is uncertain when I may return."

Now, at this point in his programme, Marion was supposed to start, or change colour visibly—if she repressed a faint cry. Unluckily, nothing of the sort took place.

When the Earl of Salisbury with infinite toil and difficulty brought his battering engines to bear upon the battlements of Dunbar, and discharged them with great pomp of preparation, it must have been a severe trial even of that good-natured noble's temper when he saw no more damage done than the raising of dust that the Amazon's kerchief could sweep away. Alas, my brethren! many dames and damsels, since Black Agnes's day—not of the haughty Douglas blood—have been found, saucy enough to set at nought the heaviest of man's artillery.

It is no wonder Flemyng felt intensely discomfited, when looking earnestly on his companion, he met—not the expected signs of trepidation—but a light, mocking smile.

"And is that all, *beau sire*?" she said. "Do you know, that

you almost frightened me with your solemn preamble? You could not look more dolorous if you were going to be transported, instead of starting on an 'outing' for your own good pleasure. I should rather envy you, if——"

Vincent broke in here: he was so very angry, that he could hardly keep within the bounds of courtesy.

"I do envy *you*—your faculty of being amused. When I like people, I hate to leave them for long; and I don't see anything very exhilarating in indefinite absence."

Mrs Charteris saw that her gay humour had carried her somewhat too far; she was not tired of her pretty plaything yet; and was, besides, really too good-natured to hurt any one's feelings wittingly. Her face softened on the instant; and the smile faded from her lip, though it lingered in her eyes.

"Indeed I did not mean to be unkind. I had not an idea of indefinite absence. Why cannot you come back when you please? Vincent, surely you have not got into any scrape—already?"

In the midst of the lavish wealth and luxury of her present existence, some of her childish memories haunted Marion still. She could not forget, how often her old Turkoman of a father would pluck up his tent-pole at the shortest notice, and depart for fresh pastures, having exhausted all the forage around him. Even now, her only idea of a grave embarrassment was, one of the exchequer.

Fleming answered, less impatiently than before, but still with a marked discontent, and some slight hesitation to boot; for his financial conscience smote him, just then, as it had done the night before.

"No,—that is not the reason; at least, not the main one. But I think of going in for painting, as a profession. They tell me I might succeed—anyhow it's worth trying. I'm sick of book-work. Besides, what should keep me here, or make me hurry back? No one will miss me, except my mother, and Kate—if Seyton will let her. Some will be glad enough when I'm gone. I think, your husband will be one of these. His manner to-day was hardly to be mistaken."

If Marion had shown fear or shrinking, or even dislike, at

the mention of that last name—the name that she was bound to honour above all—it would have been better than the careless contempt that she took no pains to conceal. Yet, it may be, that some of the scorn that lightened over her face may have been roused, unconsciously to herself, by the childish fretfulness of that last reply.

“What an ingenious self-tormentor it is,” she said. “I wonder if any one ever took the trouble before to decipher Mr Charteris’ looks and manners so carefully? I never did, I’m ashamed to say. I am sure you are wrong—not that it would matter much, if you were right. I believe he rather likes you than otherwise; but he would no more think of showing disapproval of *my* friends, than I should of betraying that I was bored by his. I fancy the painting scheme, very much; it would be so nice to sit to you, when you were famous: and you will be that, I know—if you’ll only try. But you can work just as well here, after one season in Rome. Now—listen, Signor d’Urbino; you don’t deserve any favour, for the ingratitude of certain words in that cross speech of yours; but I’ll be magnanimous, and put you in good humour again, without more teasing. Do you know, that, when I was amused just now, it was more at the coincidence than anything else? It *was* a coincidence; for you could only have guessed by a miracle that we think of spending next Easter in Rome.”

Vincent Flemyng must have been made of stuff marvellously stiff and stern, if he had not been instantly cured of his evil temper; though perchance he ran the more risk of succumbing to another malady; for those last seemingly simple words were barbed by a glance of perilous meaning. He was not often wont to show surprise and pleasure so openly and naturally as he did now; indeed, he answered, with an audible catching of the breath,—

“Is it possible? It would be too cruel to mock me with false hopes?”

With the tiny brodered glove that she held in her bare right hand, she smote him lightly on the cheek.

“Ah, slow of belief! It would serve you right if I told you that it was only an idea, not an arranged plan. But I’m not

in a cruel mood to-day; besides, you've had enough to worry you lately, poor thing! It is quite settled that we are to be in Rome early in March, to stay—that is, I shall—till the middle of May. John will only convoy me there and back, I suppose: he would pine to death if he were two whole months away from Charteris Royal. Don't you wonder how it was first thought of? It's simple enough. His only sister will never leave Italy while she lives, and her health is very uncertain now. And Aunt Minna, who was more than a mother to me, seems a fixture there, too. So we are going to pay our respects to our respective relatives; a sort of pilgrimage, you know. Isn't it touching? And I shall be able to superintend your studies, and criticise your models, and get you to lionize me over the palaces in your play-hours. *Enfant, es-tu content à la fin?* ”

Though her tone was bantering still, and bespoke the easy security of woman dealing with boyhood, Vincent Flemyng was rather more than content, and he told Marion so—this time without hesitating.

It is not necessary to chronicle their converse further; those brief, broken sentences—more subdued than the tinkle of the distant fountain—could be edifying to no readers of mine: to some, possibly, they would not even be new, or instructive. Yet every one might have been uttered aloud, and overheard by any but ill-natured ears, without involving either of the speakers in a suspicion of intended guilt. They were simply the common-places that might pass between very old friends who were about to be separated for a while; flavoured perhaps with a slight spice of coquetry on the one side, and sentimental folly on the other. No very pungent seasonings, one would say. As the North-country sage remarks,—“That's as there-after may be.”

It is true, that Marion had called Vincent Flemyng from childhood by his Christian name, and looked down upon his recent manhood from the height of five-and-twenty summers; it is certain that she had now no other intention than that of prosecuting—at his expense—fresh studies in her favourite science; if any shadowy compunction crossed her mind, that

some harm or sorrow might possibly come to the subject of her experiments, she stifled it by thinking of the charming wife that she would search out and provide for him some day; for of jealousy—present or prospective—she felt not a whit.

But—it was, perhaps, just retribution—she had mistaken the character with which she had to deal.

Vincent Flemmyng's infirmity of purpose and lack of nerve prevented his being really dangerous as yet; he had also some few very faint scruples still to cast behind him; but there was a black drop in his blood, that with time, practice, and opportunity, was soon to tinge his whole nature. No generous impulses or high aspirations had ever taken root in his shallow, arid heart: yet the ground did not long lie fallow before the evil sower was busy. Truly, the tares grew rank and rife there already; though the season of ripening and reaping was not yet.

Speaking as an individual, and an outsider, I decline to trust, in any shape whatsoever, either love or friendship Platonical. In all ages, it seems to have been little better than a delusion and a snare.

Did the devotion which began *en tout bien, et tout honneur*, always hold pure to the end, when, in the soft *langue d'Oc*, the troubadour chanted, to ears willing and unwilling, the praises of his sovereign lady? Scarcely so: or we should never have heard of such stories as that one, which might stand side by side with the Thyestean horror. I doubt if the fashion answered, under the starched *régime* of the Virgin Queen, when the courtly Audacity wooed his fair Discretion in the long-winded conceits of Euphues; or, later, when Chloris, in rouge, powder, and patches, blushed over the mawkish pastorals of a periwigged Amyntas. I doubt yet more if it can answer in these days of 'innocent fastnesses,' when our children cut their wisdom teeth so exceedingly early; when Prudery on her promotion disdains not the decorative devices of Anonyma; and when Hercè is prone to distrust her own fascinations, unaided by the sisterly Cestus.

I am far from insinuating that modern Platonics must necessarily, or even probably, come to grief. I simply suggest that

the principle is more treacherous than that of open and avowed flirtation, shielded by no specious pretext of ancient friendship, occult sympathies, or difference of age.

From all this it may be inferred that, if a majority of the matrons named in this tale should comport themselves after a fashion unbecoming the sedate dignity of their order, it does not follow that their chronicler should endorse such proceedings, or hold them up as models for imitation. On the other hand, I will not in anywise admit that the state of things here depicted is either imaginary, or grossly overdrawn; the colouring may be coarsely or clumsily laid on, if you will; I deny that it is exaggerated.

Did not that illustrious philosopher who, from the height of his æsthetic *cathedra*, is good enough, week by week, to dictate to us what, morally speaking, we ought to eat, drink, and avoid—indite, only last season, one of his most authoritative essays on “Wives and their Followers?” Remembering how, when the said edict was issued, it only provoked a twitter of irreverent mirth amongst the “light-minded birds” that it was meant to warn—I expect that this meek protest of mine will meet with no better fate.

In the present case Mrs Charteris committed herself to no direct avowal; her companion ventured on no rasher familiarity than that of laying his lips lightly on her hand at parting; but she promised correspondence, and made several other small concessions, chiefly prospective, which it is needless to particularize. With all the advantage of superior age and experience, she achieved but a very Pyrrhic victory after all.

It was no great wonder if Vincent Flemyng issued from the *tête-à-tête* with a flushed cheek and sparkling eyes—contented and hopeful, if not wildly triumphant. He had gained a short step or two on that evil road, where the last strides are so fearfully long and rapid; novice as he was, he knew that right well. So, when they rejoined the party in the Green Drawing-room, he took part in the somewhat lively word-play with a confidence and success which rather surprised even his patroness herself; and caused Lady Greystoke—one of the best judges of ‘colts’ in all England—thus to deliver herself to Marion soon after he departed:—

“You’ve always shown good taste in choosing your *cavalieri*, dear, I must say that. I think your page promises very fairly. He’s dreadfully conceited, of course, but I think conceit suits that style of face. He wants repose; and you must teach him not to look round after each of his sharp or pretty speeches to see if the hit is palpable or not. But all these things are a mere question of education; don’t you agree with me?”

And Marion answered not in words, but smiled a little demure smile, in which there was satisfaction, but scant personal interest—very much as if her pet performing bullfinch had been highly praised.

On the whole, as the Kitten bore Flemyng rapidly and safely homewards, he was warmed with a comfortable inward conviction of having achieved a decided social success, and of having, perchance, left a little crop of regrets behind him. Indeed, during all the remainder of the evening he bore himself with a complacent—not to say conquering—air, which chafed Tom Seyton sorely, and puzzled his devoted womankind.

Vincent’s brief stay at Warleigh passed off without any further ‘breezes;’ but Mrs Flemyng was the only one who felt, or testified, desolation at his departure. Even unsuspecting Kate confessed to herself that a sojourn in foreign parts might be beneficial to her brother, if not to his worldly prospects.

So Flemyng, after settling some necessary Oxford claims, and making brief preparations in town, started, with two travelling companions, on one of the myriad roads that, as the proverb tells us, lead to the site of the Golden Column.

CHAPTER X.

FELo DE SE.

You may remember that Tom Seyton, in his first perplexity after witnessing a certain interview on his road home from Torrcaster, resolved within himself that he ‘would talk to Kate about

it.' This he carried out on the morrow of the day the events of which have been told in the last chapter.

Mrs Seyton was quite superb in her indignation. Being a very woman, of course the vials of her wrath were poured out on the feminine culprit; and—also of course—at the end of her tirade, she professed herself “unable to guess what attraction Brian could find in that audacious vulgar style of beauty.” Suddenly she broke off with a comic horror; seeing, or thinking she saw, signs of dissent in her husband’s face.

“Oh, Tom, I do believe you admire her. Don’t confess it, if you do: I couldn’t stand *that*.”

Seyton’s hearty, jovial laugh rang out, unrestrained.

“I won’t be intimidated,” he said. “I do admire her, in a certain way; not exactly as a woman, but as a very magnificent animal. And I don’t quite see the vulgarity you talk of; at least, not on the surface: there’s enough and to spare below, I daresay. But as to the audacity—I go with you thoroughly, my Kate. I’d shut Brian up in a mad-house, if I had my way, sooner than see him make that girl mistress of Mote. Even if she were perfection, her connections are simply infamous. There are all sorts of shady reports about the father, though I’ve never taken the trouble to listen to them; and there’s a cousin always hanging about the house, than whom there’s not a cleverer scoundrel unhung; that I happen to know. What’s to be done? I suppose I ought not to keep Brian’s secret, if he has one; and yet, of all things in this world, I hate meddling with other people’s affairs. Perhaps there’s nothing more than folly in it, after all.”

“There can’t be a doubt about it,” Kate said, decisively; “I’m sure poor Mr Maskelyne always expected you to look after Brian. Besides, you would really be his guardian if anything happened to his mother; and something would happen if that boy were to commit himself irretrievably. It would kill her; I’m certain of it.”

“You’re more than half right,” Seyton answered, “but one’s duty needs to be made very plain, before one can swallow the ‘tale-bearing’ pill; especially when it’s tale-bearing of women, to women. I’ll tell you what I’ll do: I’ll sound Brian himself first. He’s sure to be at Claxton Wood on Monday, and it will

be easy to find an opportunity. He's a good lad enough at bottom; and he really likes me, I do believe; he'll tell no lies, if he don't own all the truth. I shouldn't be much afraid for him, if this particular folly was not in his blood."

With this Kate was fain to be content; indeed, she herself thought it about the best plan; for she liked the tale-bearing part of the business not a whit better than Tom did; and would have infinitely preferred that things should be set right without troubling Mrs Maskelyne.

Claxton Wood held a fox, as usual, but not one of the right sort: the varlet kept dodging round the edge of the brakes till half the horses out were fretted into foam with perpetual false starts; and then died ingloriously after a brief, sulky ring through a few deep inclosures.

It was a long distance to the next likely draw; for even the hounds never dreamt of finding in the copses and belts that they bustled through, as a matter of form, on their way. Seyton soon found himself alongside of Brian Maskelyne, to the rearward of the long cavalcade, that jogged on by twos and threes along the narrow lanes and field-roads. Few words—and these of no significance—had passed between them, besides the wonted morning greeting; but Brian knew perfectly well what Seyton wanted, when the latter's whip-handle touched him lightly on the shoulder. He reined back till they rode alone together, and waited quietly for the other to begin.

Tom Seyton, being absolutely incapable of a long oration, was apt to come to the point with scanty form of words. He did so now, though he spoke with all gentleness and consideration; claiming no shadow of authority or title to interfere, beyond that of hereditary friendship.

"I was only a boy when you were christened," he said, "but I remember your father's proud, happy face, as well as if it were yesterday. I remember that same face, the day before he died—how pale, and haggard, and eager it looked, as he held my hand, and whispered: 'You'll help Brian, if ever you can?' I promised him I would; though I wondered why he had not put confidence in some one older than I was, and wiser and cleverer than I ever shall be. And, by God's help, so I will, so long as we both

shall live. Brian, that is what makes me say to you to-day, that I would rather—a hundred times—see you lying by George Maskelyne's side than sitting by Bessie Standen's and calling her wife "

Voice and lip shook a little as he ended, and the bluff honest face was strangely troubled; nor had Brian's been quite free from emotion throughout; especially since the mention of his dead father's name.

There was nothing in him of Vincent Flemyng's fretful perverse conceit; nor had one word of the warning chafed him. Having loved and honoured his counsellor for many a year, he did not love or honour him a whit less for having spoken out boldly much that he knew himself to be true—whether he would heed it or no. In his great black eyes, as he answered, there rose once more that peculiar look—half earnest, half dreamy. Seyton, who had known his face from babyhood, was struck just then by its ominous, melancholy beauty, as though he saw it for the first time.

"Don't think me mad," he said, "or too ungrateful, because I can't thank you properly; or answer you on the spot, exactly as you would wish. You are right in much that you say; wrong, where you don't know those you speak of. I will promise you to think over every word you have said: I can't promise more just now. I don't ask you to keep my secret: but I do think your speaking to my mother would do more harm than good. I would tell her myself if there were anything to tell; and so I will—always."

He held out his hand; and the other pressed it heartily. Nevertheless, there was a steadfast calmness in Brian's tone and manner that Seyton liked ill; it savoured too much of a set purpose, a pre-arranged plan of speaking. But he felt rather at a loss how to continue the conversation: it was not precisely a case for argument. Besides, that non-resisting reticence is so very difficult to grapple with. Perhaps it was a relief to both, when they were interrupted by one of those Marplots, who infest even our hunting fields, ranging up alongside.

Who knows not that respectable, blundering creature, with the broad flat face, weak smiling lips, and vacant eyes; who is

perpetually breaking into confidential corners, not so much from curiosity, as from helpless awkwardness and lack of tact ; whose position in life, as the objectionable Third, seems to be no less clearly defined than that of the Fourteenth guest at Parisian dinner-tables ?

It was one of these worthies who ranged up alongside of the pair ; and prolonged his platitudes about sport and farming, till the first whimper of a hound in Denton Spinny drove out—from Tom Seyton's mind at least—all other anxieties, save and except that of getting, as quickly as possible, to the favourite corner, whence he generally secured a good start over about the stiffest bit of vale in Marlshire.

They had a very quick half-hour ; then some steady hunting ; then a short, sharp burst, and a kill. The young one that Tom was schooling that day came out brilliantly. Nevertheless, as he rode slowly homewards, his contentment was dashed by more than one misgiving of having bungled in his mission ; and Kate—though she said it not—was rather of the same opinion, when she heard the little her husband had to tell.

Had they known all the truth, both might have used the comfortable unguent, that has soothed the souls of many abler negotiators,—the reflection that all the diplomacy on earth would, probably, not have arrested what was to be, or turned him aside from his appointed path who was bound to 'dree his weird.'

Maskelyne kept his word, when he was alone at night, in thinking over all the words that he had heard that day. He thought—till his face grew white and worn with the inward struggle ; a sharper one, truly, than often is waged within so young a breast.

For most boys, tempted in like manner, seal their own ruin in a paroxysm of rash, unreasoning passion. But Brian set his hand to the work deliberately ; counting first the cost to its uttermost farthing. That he should make light of the peril of his worldly prospects, and the possible loss of his inheritance, was only natural. He was just at the age when those who have only *heard* of such things as poverty and embarrassment are loth to believe in the cruelty of Time : to these simple Erastians the

Future promises all rewards, and no punishments. Besides this, Brian knew that, at the worst, he could but be left entirely dependent on his mother; and perhaps he knew, too, better than any one, how far he might rely on her weakness or leniency.

To do him simple justice—not thus appeared to him the pale, quiet shadow, that so often that night seemed to stand at his shoulder. There was no menace in the soft eyes, that seemed to look into his own with a sad appeal; nor on the tender lips that never, since they first touched his cheek, could he remember set or stern. If Emily Maskelyne had exercised her authority austere—*or even conscientiously*, as many would think—her son would have emancipated himself far more easily: now—there was no yoke to break.

For a while, it seemed as if the gentle pleading would prevail. But soon by Brian's side stood another phantasm—scarcely shadowy in its brilliance of colouring, and clearness of outline; with a smile on its scarlet lips, mocking, but tempting still; and wealth of promises in the glorious blue eyes—the semblance of Bessie Standen, as he saw her last; half withdrawn from his embrace, and murmuring low—“Just one—no more.” As he mused, her warm fragrant breath seemed close to his cheek, and almost fanning his hair. Besides, his troth was already plighted.

Do you doubt which of those two pleaders conquered at the last?

Brian Maskelyne felt a certain relief, when his mind was made up, and his course of action finally determined. He was not likely to change either now; for, in spite of a certain tenderness of nature, he had a strong taint of his ‘dour’ race—noted for their reckless obstinacy of resolve.

Within five minutes after the great question of his life was decided, he had fallen into the deep dreamless sleep that so often follows a bodily or mental conflict.

CHAPTER XI.

A LEAP IN THE DARK.

NEVER gardener watched the rarest tropical plant more carefully than did Emily Maskelyne her son. On this especial morning, there appeared some slight reason for anxiety. The dark circles round Brian's eyes made them look unnaturally bright and large; and there was fever both in brow and hand. But he was tolerably well practised in parrying his mother's solitudes; and he soon managed to satisfy her now.

Though there was something forced and nervous in his laugh and manner, the composure with which he bore himself was quite marvellous, considering the circumstances. Truly the patrician youth of Sparta or Rome—hardened by all the rough work of the gymnasium, and the stoicism of the Schools—compared to their modern antitypes, were the merest tyros in the Art of Taking Things Coolly.

Brian Maskelyne purposed that day to go forth from his home—not to return thither, unless bringing with him his bride. Several causes contributed to this seemingly insane precipitation; though none were sufficient to excuse it.

First, there was opportunity—chief, since the world began, of all 'irritaments of evil.'

The squadrons quartered in Towcester held high festival; embracing regimental races, private theatricals, and the inevitable ball: to this entertainment Brian was invited (he cultivated soldiers a good deal, and was down for the Household Cavalry); and he was to stay the week out, being put up in barracks. So he had no occasion to invent an excuse for absence; while he would have leisure enough to concert a plan of proceeding with his betrothed.

Next, there was the natural impulse to carry out, as speedily as possible, the decision that had been long, if not long enough, in doubt; suspense and uncertainty, that were as matters of course twenty-four hours ago, seemed intolerable now.

It is the way with all conscripts, in every kind of warfare. They can never be kept steady in the trenches ; though they will advance very readily to the storm. Surely, the most martial of all slogans is—"Stand Fast, Craigellachy."

Furthermore, Brian had an exaggerated idea of Seyton's influence and power. Their conversation had left him utterly in the dark, as to how the latter would act ; and he was possessed with a vague apprehension as to the consequences, if Tom were to combine with the Regent-Mother to thwart him. Besides all this, he had that morbid horror of a 'scene' which has made older and wiser men moral dastards ; causing them to seek temporary safety in flight, though they left duty and humanity behind.

Can you understand, how Brian's conscience perforce held its peace, whilst he meditated nothing less than a black crime ?

It seems to me that, among those which our laws punish heavily, there are many sins more venial than some that mock at all human justice. Short and sharp shrift would old Draco have given to the reprobate who should have lifted his hand against the mother that bore him ; but, even in that code, I presume no punishment was set down for the son that broke his mother's heart, by leaving her—perchance for ever and aye—without a word of warning or farewell.

Just such a wrong did Brian purpose now ; a wrong so bitter, that it might have cost a remorseful pang to Emily Maskelyne's worst enemy, if she had ever made such a one in her gentle life. Yet he was of a kindly, generous nature in the main ; one of the 'well-conditioned youths,' after poor Lord Carlisle's own heart.

If all the romantic nonsense, that ever has been written or spoken about Love, were true to the letter, there would still be excuse needed—and wanting—for the cruel exclusiveness of the passion : self-sacrificing with regard to one being, and ruthless to all others—it sometimes contrives to ignore natural affections, not less easily than the other parts of the Whole Duty of Man.

If pride and envy prompted the first murder, I believe that the old question—"Where is the woman ?"—might have been asked, and answered, on the occasion of the first parricide.

So Brian Maskelyne—being such a one as I have tried to de-

scribe—on this occasion sate with his mother through breakfast (which he consumed with a very tolerable appetite); answered her questions, and listened to her plans for the future, without any outward sign of emotion. He scarcely shrank or shivered, when the poor lady bade him good-bye, with some jesting cautions about “taking care of himself; and not getting into mischief in barracks, or at the ball.” Yet Emily Maskelyne did remember, in the desolate after-days, that her son’s arm lingered longer round her neck, and that he turned on the threshold to kiss her a second time.

She had good reason to remember that caress. It was the last that ever passed between those two—the last that ever shall pass; unless lips may be laid on lips, in greetings beyond the grave.

Brian’s conduct was heartless enough, in all conscience; but there is just this much to be said in his favour. He did not contemplate a permanent separation, or even a very long absence from home. The fact was, that he had never fully realized the objections to his intended alliance; this was partly his own fault, partly the design of others. It is true that, had he chosen to inquire, or even to listen, he would have heard much to the disadvantage, and very little to the credit, of Standen *père*: but Bessie’s connections had had the tact to keep themselves sedulously in the background, so as not to interfere with the effect of the prominent figure. On the very rare occasions when Brian had visited the damsel at her own home, the old man had always been absent. He hardly knew Kit Daventry by sight; though that astute individual knew *him* as well as he did the owner of the leading Derby favourite.

Therefore, you may understand why Brian could not appreciate the motives that would urge his gentle, indulgent mother to prolonged resistance. He thought that she would be seriously vexed at first, but would soon yield when she found his happiness irretrievably involved; nor, at the very worst, could he conceive that she would hold any fault of his unpardonable. It was so much better that she should know nothing till all was comparatively settled; if the first shock could once be got over, and Bessie allowed to present herself at Mote, her lover doubted not

but that her charms would soon conquer both prejudice and scruples.

Thus he went forth on his unholy errand—if not with cheerful confidence, at least neither desponding nor gravely self-reproachful. And behind him, stride for stride, moved with his awful, even pace, Time, the Avenger.

The post came in early at Mote. Mrs Maskelyne's correspondence was always brought to her in bed, with that normal cup of tea which braces most of our dames and damsels for the labours of the day. On the fourth morning after his departure came a letter from Brian: needless to say, that it was opened first of the pile

The maid, who was busied in the room on some of the duties of her calling, was startled by a low gasping cry behind her. She turned, and found her mistress struggling for breath, with a terrible agony on her white face—physical, it seemed, as well as mental; for the hand that was free—the other crushed the letter—was pressed convulsively on her side.

But Mrs Maskelyne did not faint, and soon recovered herself sufficiently to speak, though only in a weak whisper. The words were—

“Send to Warleigh at once, and beg Mr Seyton to come to me.”

Then she told the maid to put some sal-volatile within her reach and to leave her. With all her gentleness and consideration, Mrs Maskelyne's household never dreamt of questioning one of her commands; so the woman went, albeit reluctantly and under protest. She was an old faithful servant: nevertheless it deserves to be recorded, to her credit, that she kept all surmises and misgivings to herself; and, after despatching the messenger, only confided to her fellows in the steward's room that “her mistress had had bad news that morning, and she hoped it had nothing to do with Mr Brian.”

After a while Mrs Maskelyne's bell rang. She went through her toilette quite quietly and composedly; though she still looked very wan and weak, and her breath every now and then seemed to fail her. She even tried to eat some breakfast, which meal was always served in her boudoir when she was alone. Almost before

this melancholy pretence was over, there was a sharp ring at the great bell ; and the poor lady felt a momentary relief when Seyton's name was announced.

It was but six miles or so to Warleigh. Tom's back was at the door when the messenger came ; for the M. F. H. met far off that day. It took him three minutes to change his pink for a shooting-jacket, and to get to saddle ; twenty more, at a stretching gallop, brought him to Mote. He guessed right well why he was sent for ; the letter that Mrs Maskelyne put into his hand, without speaking a word, did not greatly surprise, though it grieved and angered him bitterly

It was a cold cruel letter ; shameful for Brian to have penned, even if every word in it had been prompted by others. He was not good at epistles, to be sure ; indeed, his education had been decidedly desultory, depending more on his own very moderate zeal than on the will of an obsequious tutor. Perhaps the unwonted attempt to be earnest and impressive, gave him a sort of moral cramp : but old fools, as well as young ones—meaning to be solemn—are often simply formal.

The letter set forth the writer's passion for Miss Standen ; his fears that it would not, at present, be sanctioned by his mother ; his hopes that she would soon accord her consent, ' without which we can never be happy ; ' his intentions of absconding, accompanied by the fair object, ' who knows she can trust to my honour ; ' and his fixed resolve neither to present himself at Mote, nor to be brought back thither, unless the union were authorized and approved. A few common-places of excuse and regret, and—nothing more : no clue given to the retreat of the fugitives, and no address beyond one—vague enough, surely, to shelter any criminals—Poste Restante, Paris. As to whether immediate marriage was contemplated or no, there was silence discreet and absolute.

No wonder that such a letter made Tom Seyton savage. Though, even then, he blamed others more than the unhappy boy, he felt for a brief space as he never thought to feel towards George Maskelyne's son. But, had he been thrice as angry, he would have kept back all bitterness, in pity to the stricken woman who sate there, waiting so anxiously for counsel, if not comfort.

"Mrs Maskelyne," he said, striking the paper sharply with his finger, "don't vex yourself, now or hereafter, about the tone of that letter. I would swear Brian never wrote one word out of his own head. I can fancy how it was dictated."

"You had some idea of this, then — and never told me?"

Those words were too gently spoken to sound upbraiding; but it was very, very long before Seyton forgot the piteous look, which gave them such a sad significance. All along he had known that such a question must come: yet, fore-knowledge did not prevent his feeling painfully contrite and confused; the bold, open brow, that since childhood had never blenched before his own sex, was apt, you will remember—with less reason than now—to veil itself in the presence of womanhood.

"I did wrong, perhaps," he answered, after a pause; "yet not so wrong as you may think—not so wrong, I do hope, as to forbid your trusting me still. This is all I knew."

Then, as briefly and simply as was possible, he told her what you have heard already. It was not in Emily Maskelyne's nature to nourish resentment long against any living creature; much less against a loyal friend, who could only have erred unwittingly. Before he had half done speaking, Seyton saw that she had forgiven him; as he ended, she took his hand in both her own and touched it with her lips. Tom almost started, they were so deathly cold.

"You meant kindly," she said, "as you always do. And speaking to me could have done but little good; it might only have made more bitterness between me and my poor boy. As it was, he did kiss me—he kissed me twice—before he went. You will never quite give him up, I know that; my husband knew it too, or he would not have looked so happy when he died. But, oh! how *could* he leave such a heavy trust to me? I am neither good nor wise enough to bear it. I have known all along, that, when the time of trial came—and it was sure to come—I should fail miserably. Now, if I had only my own strength to rely on, I think I should lose my head utterly. But I will try—indeed I will—to do my duty, if you will only help me. I will act just as you advise, without questioning; and neither write nor speak a

word that you do not sanction. But you will not leave me to myself ?”

All this while her thin white fingers never relaxed their clasp of the broad weather-stained hand ; it seemed as if the mere physical support gave some small comfort. Yet that same hand shook sometimes like an aspen, as Seyton tried all the resources of his simple healing skill.

He pointed out to Mrs Maskelyne that as Brian had not broken out into overt rebellion, by avowing an intention of immediate matrimony, there was still a possibility of bringing him to reason. The Standen party were too cunning to precipitate matters ; and would never advise absolute forfeiture of the great heritage. There was a chance of working on their cupidity, if all direct influences on Brian failed. But on one point Tom took his stand inflexibly : not the faintest hope was to be held out that Mrs Maskelyne would sanction the alliance, either now or hereafter ; or that—if her veto were set at nought—she would refrain from exercising the powers reverting to her by her husband’s will.

While they were yet speaking, there came another jangle at the ponderous hall-door bell. There was a curious uncertainty about that ring : it looked as if it had been begun timidly and dubiously, but finished off with a sort of nervous impatience. Tom, at least, guessed who the visitor was likely to be, before the card was brought in, which Mrs Maskelyne passed over to him, without speaking, but with a startled look in her eyes.

Mr James Standen

was engraved thereon, in letters huge and ponderous enough to have represented a ‘ warm ’ city-name.

“ Will you see him here ? ” Seyton asked ; as if the interview was a matter-of-course.

Mrs Maskelyne bowed her head in assent : in truth, she felt hardly equal to the physical exertion of moving to another and distant room, just then.

Tom had time to say—

“ Pray let me speak for you ; and don’t interfere, however

harsh or hard I may seem. You haven't an idea of the sort of person with whom we have to deal."

The last words were hardly uttered when the visitor was announced.

CHAPTER XII.

A HEAVY FATHER.

MR STANDEN, as was afore said, had once been a very personable specimen of the florid style. He had certainly, that day, made the most of the outward advantages that drink and advancing age had left him. There was little to object to in his attire; it bore traces of a sharp ride from Torrcaster; but the well-polished boots gleamed through the mud-flecks, and the pale-drab Bedford cords fitted him with artistic ease. There was not an inappropriate wrinkle in the snowy muslin folded round his massive throat; even his gloves were neat, if workman-like: in fine, the whole 'get-up' was that of the heavy middle-aged sportsman; and it was very creditably done. But some of the other accessories were rather a failure; at the second glance, the travestie was apparent. The bloated face, with its turgid veins; the watery eyes, blinking under heavy flaccid lids; the weak, pendulous upper lip; told of deep debauch over-night, and frequent morning 'refreshers,'—of long vigils in heated billiard-rooms and crowded hells,—of anything, rather than honest hard work, under sun and storm.

Nor was the visitor's manner very prepossessing. The cleverest of his class *will* swagger, when they are at all nervous. That Mr Standen was so could not be disguised; indeed, as he glanced round the room on entering, he started palpably.

The fact was, though he had fully reckoned on being confronted with Seyton sooner or later, he never expected to find him at Mote.

There was nothing aggressive, or particularly imposing, in Tom's demeanour as he stood with his back to the fire, in the Briton's favourite colossal attitude. Nevertheless, it might have discouraged a bolder schemer than Jem Standen was before drink had spoilt his nerve. If the keen grey eyes were not warlike or defiant, they were watchful exceedingly; the very *pose* of the square, upright figure—poised lightly, yet so solidly, on the sturdy lower limbs—betokened a man whom it would be difficult to delude or cajole, utterly impossible to bully; moreover, the bluff sunburnt face, that a few minutes ago had been so pitiful and tender, was now—as Daventry had described it—‘set like a flintstone.’

Mr Standen was further embarrassed by doubts and misgivings as to the style in which his salutation should be made. He had met Seyton often enough in the hunting-field and elsewhere to establish a sort of acquaintance; yet he could not but remember that Tom—familiar, if not friendly, as a rule, with every class, from lord to labourer—had never favoured him with anything beyond a careless nod or casual remark in passing. At first, he thought of offering his hand; but drew it back again, just too late to dissemble the intention; finally, he contented himself with a circular bow, addressed to the company in general. Now, this sort of *congé* is rather a trial, even to an expert courtier entirely at his ease: judge of its effect when executed by poor Jem Standen.

His first remark, too, was wonderfully *naïf* and truthful.

“I wished to see Mrs Maskelyne alone.”

Seyton had a straightforward simplicity about him, which was sometimes more disconcerting than other men's sarcasms.

“I've no doubt you did (there's a chair close behind you, Mr Standen); but Mrs Maskelyne is not equal to such an interview, just now. She wishes me, not only to be present, but to speak for her. Is it not so?”

She assented in a voice that hardly faltered at all. During the last few minutes there had come to the unhappy lady a certain feverish access of strength; springing from the very extremity of her disgust and despair. She had asked herself the question—“Shall such a creature as that ever show him-

self at Mote as the father of its mistress?" And she had answered—resolutely enough, for the nonce—"Never; while I can stir hand to prevent it."

Standen sat down on the proffered chair very readily; but for some seconds he kept tapping his boot with his riding-whip, as if uncertain how to begin: he was evidently still ill at ease. Ever since the hall-doors swung to behind him, he had felt an oppression of moral breathing, answering to the physical sensations of such as climb unwonted heights: the social atmosphere was, by many degrees, too rarefied. At last he cleared his throat and spoke; addressing himself, perforce, to Seyton.

"I presume you know upon what business I have come here?"

"Partly so, but not entirely," Tom replied. "It must refer to yonder precious composition, of course" (he pointed contemptuously to the letter lying open where he had cast it on a table near); "but we don't know whether we are to suppose you are acquainted with its contents. We don't know, either, whether you come solely on your own account, or as an ambassador from others."

His antagonist was prepared for him here; and came to the parry and riposte with commendable promptitude: that look of injured dignity had probably been practised more than once before.

"I consider such doubts an insult," he said, flushing angrily (those sanguine cheeks were always apt enough at that sign of emotion); "I have not the faintest idea of the contents of that letter, which, I presume, is written by Mr Brian Maskelyne. And, as to others, I know no more of their movements or intentions than you do,—if so much."

"Don't excite yourself," Tom retorted, coolly and carelessly; "there's not the smallest occasion for heroics. This is neither the time nor place for insults; and such things are in singularly bad taste, when a mere matter of business is being discussed. It was necessary to know on what grounds we started—that's all. As you come, then, solely on your own business, perhaps you'll be good enough to state it, as concisely as possible."

"Whatever you do—keep cool." So spake Kit the Lawyer

that very morning; after refusing to allow his uncle a second stirrup-cup. The warning had been ringing in Jem Standen's ears ever since; but he well-nigh forgot it now. There was something in Seyton's tone and manner—though both were quiet to a degree—that sorely galled even the case-hardened sensibilities of the drunken, shameless old turfite. He ground his teeth hard; and, so, just managed to drive back the coarse, passionate words that must have broken off negotiations at once; but he answered, almost in a growl,

“My business is simple enough. I was away from home all yesterday, and only got back by the early train this morning. My daughter had disappeared: she had gone out early in the evening, and had not been heard of since. She had left this note for me; you can see it, if you like; it tells little that you don't know already, I daresay. I wish to be informed, what are Mrs Maskelyne's feelings on the subject; and what are her intentions with regard to her son? That's only natural, I think.”

Tom waved back the proffered document with a gesture of rather exaggerated politeness.

“Thanks. I don't fancy the reading of Miss Standen's confession would help us much. It is probably nearly a counterpart of the one before us. So you were away all yesterday, and all last night? That was very unlucky. And you can give us no clue to their retreat; nor even to the route they would take if they went beyond Paris? More unlucky still. But such things will happen. You think it natural that you should inquire into Mrs Maskelyne's feelings and intentions? I regret that I can't quite agree with you. It strikes me that with her feelings you have no concern whatever, any more than you have with mine. As to her intentions—I'll try and make them clear to you. I believe I understand them thoroughly.”

The other lifted his head, that had sunk nearly to his breast, and glared up once at the speaker, with his sullen, bloodshot eyes. On this scant encouragement, Tom went on—placidly as ever.

“You are here on your own account; that's understood.

Nevertheless, I must give you just the same answer as will be sent to Brian Maskelyne. He says, in his letter, that he will never return to Mote, unless with Miss Standen as his accepted wife. Then—he will never return at all. I don't wish to be offensive; but plain-speaking is necessary. We decline the alliance, absolutely and unconditionally. Wait; it will save time if you hear me out. I need not go into the objections; it might not be pleasant for you to hear them all; but they are insurmountable, now and for ever. I say 'we;' because Mrs Maskelyne has promised to be guided by me in this matter; and, further, if anything were to happen to her, I and the other trustees would stand in her position towards Brian, with less discretionary powers. The penal clauses of the will are very stringent and clear, as I daresay you know. We are prepared to put every one of them in force, sooner than countenance or condone such a marriage as this."

Standen broke in here; speaking hurriedly and hoarsely.

"But he must marry her—else what will become of my child's good name? Do you suppose that is worth nothing? Or that she is not as dear to me as yonder boy can be to his mother—let alone yourself, who have chosen to interfere? We'll have justice if there's law in England, in spite of you."

"Pardon me," Tom retorted. "I don't see the 'must' at all. I wouldn't talk too much about 'law' either, if I were you: the Law, as far as I remember, isn't fond of holding minors to matrimonial bargains. I don't intend to dispute the value of your daughter's fair fame; or your fatherly affection either. I only wonder it did not teach you to look more sharply after her proceedings. It's imprudent—to say the least of it—to allow girls to keep assignations in the dusk; as I happen to know *she* did. You didn't hear of it—of course? But, perhaps, you have heard of the proverb, concerning the worst sort of blindness."

The other rose up—his face all a-flame. In truth, Seyton's tone of late had grown unendurably provocative: he was not aware of it; and indeed, was rather priding himself, inwardly, on his diplomatic calmness; but, momentarily, he was more and more overmastered by wrath, and loathing, and scorn.

"Do you stand there, and tell me coolly, that my child is to live and die a harlot (he used a coarser term), because she's not good enough to satisfy your family pride? It's encouraging seduction: neither more nor less. And you call yourself a Christian and a gentleman?"

It is probable, that the heat and passion of the man were neither assumed, nor attributable to mere greed of gain, or lust of power. He thought, no doubt, first and foremost, of the rich prize that seemed slipping from his daughter's grasp: but he may have thought too, with a pang of real remorse, of her honour, perilled—perchance, lost—in vain.

That furious outbreak quieted Tom Seyton more effectually than any remonstrance could have done; for he was conscious of being, to some extent, accountable for it. He answered first Mrs Maskelyne's nervous glance of appeal; anything in the shape of violence was so utterly strange to her, that it was no wonder if she felt shocked and frightened.

"Pray forgive me; if I had been more guarded, you would not have been exposed to this."

His tone, as he went on speaking, brought Standen to his senses at once; it was no longer contemptuous or insolent; only very grave and stern.

"We both seem to have forgotten in whose presence we are talking. There are great allowances to be made for your excitement, Mr Standen; but you must not say one other word in that tone—much less such words as you have used—if you wish to prolong the conversation. I confess, it seems to me needless and useless to do so. I look upon seduction no more leniently than you do; but I like to be sure that the term is not misapplied. I'm not fond of advancing more than I can prove; so I say nothing more of Miss Standen than—this. From all I've seen and heard, I believe her to be as capable of taking care of herself as any woman alive, of her age. And further—I believe that same age to be a year or so in advance of Brian Maskelyne's. The case is good enough for my conscience, anyhow. I hope I shall never have a heavier sin on it than preventing this marriage, if it be possible; or of punishing it to the utmost, if it can't be prevented. You can

force it on in spite of us—we know that. It will be quite legal in a few months' time. Only remember: you, and all it may concern, are fairly forewarned. They will have £1000 a year during Brian's life: at his death there will not be a shadow of provision for widow or child; unless he can afford to insure his life. You heard Mrs Maskelyne say, at the beginning of this interview that she wished me to speak no less for her than for myself. I speak for both, now. If Brian chooses to cast his birthright away, and you choose to abet him in his deed, you shall do so at least wilfully and wittingly. Upon one shilling beyond what I have named, neither you nor he need reckon."

Though Seyton spoke with a solemn firmness, that carried conviction even to the base suspicious nature he addressed, he felt exceedingly nervous—if truth must be told—as he withdrew his keen steadfast eyes from Standen; and turned them—half-inquiringly, half-warningly—on Mrs Maskelyne. He feared that the trial would prove too strong for the unhappy mother's resolve; and that, by voice or gesture, she would strive to soften down the harshness of his own concluding words. But the lady's face was bowed down in her clasped hands: though the wan fingers quivered visibly, they veiled effectually all sign of weakness, from friend or foe.

Jem Standen was fairly penned. Rehearsing these things (or as much as he dared confess), in the sad sobriety of next morning, to his discontented nephew—he thus, in the metaphorical 'milling' tongue, described his own sensations.

"It's devilish easy work for backers, Kit; they've only got to sit comfortably on the straw, and tell their man to 'go in and win.' He's a d—d awkward customer—is Seyton: I never meant to tackle him, alone; you know that. I tell you, I was over-matched from first to last: I did no good at out-fighting; and I did worse still, when I tried to close. Curse him! He was as cool as a cucumber, while I was hitting wild. I was getting groggier every minute; he'd have bored me down on the ropes in no time, if I hadn't got away."

Under the circumstances, 'geting away' was perhaps the wisest thing Jem Standen could do. He stood silent, for a brief space after Seyton had finished speaking; and then said slowly—

"Is that your last word?"

"The very last," Tom answered; "at least—here. I've two or three more to say, that it may be for your advantage to listen to; but that you can decide for yourself: I don't insist on your attention. I'll show you the short way to the stables, if Mrs Maskelyne will allow me. I suppose your horse was taken there."

He stooped and whispered a few syllables of encouragement in the poor lady's ear, as he passed; and then walked to the door, just as composedly as if he were marshalling out an ordinary visitor. The other man followed, with a sort of sulky, helpless acquiescence; very much like a bear who has just returned to obedience, after breaking collar and chain. But on the threshold he turned, and glared at the quiet figure—still motionless in its stricken attitude—with a bitter spite on his inflamed face.

"You'll wish me back again, one of these fine days, my lady"—he said, in a gruff whisper; so low, that Seyton, in the corridor without, did not catch the words.

It is doubtful if Mrs Maskelyne heard them aright: she started slightly, like one who hears suddenly some harsh or disagreeable sound; but she never raised her head, or seemed otherwise to heed.

So—with even less ceremony and dignity than had attended his entrance—Mr Standen went forth, for ever, from the presence of the mistress of Mote.

Seyton spoke never a word, till they had passed through a maze of stone passages leading to a postern door, and so out into an alley of laurels, the further extremity of which abutted on the stable-yard.

Then, he stopped short; and accosted his companion abruptly. Once more, his tone had changed; it was not marked by bitterness or sarcasm, nor even great earnestness, now; there was rather in it an easy familiarity, not especially flattering to the person addressed; such as one might use, chaffing with a second-rate horse-dealer.

"Look here,"—he said. "We'll drop all that humbug, about your not being privy to this affair from the very beginning.

Now—it's not the slightest use, your firing up: I only quarrel with men of my own station and my own age: you can walk on if you don't care to listen. You do care? That's well. After all, I don't know that you are really to be blamed, for doing your best for your own. That's hardly the point, though. You've not made much ground, so far; and, trust me, you never will. Wouldn't it be worth your while to draw stakes? You needn't be afraid of naming a sum. Brian can do little himself, even if he would: but you shall be satisfied, if I have to mortgage Warleigh. My children will get it back one day—if I don't. The boy can never be of much use to you; and he's very dear to *us*? Won't you let him go free?"

His honest eyes did not seek to disguise their eagerness; but Jem Standen's met them coolly and cunningly.

"Are you aware what you're doing?" he asked. "You're simply tempting me to set a price on my daughter's virtue."

"Not a bit of it"—Tom retorted, in nowise disconcerted. "There's a limit to everything; I wouldn't do *that* to save my own son—let alone another man's. Brian says in his letter, that 'she has trusted to his honour:' she was right enough in doing so, I'll swear. You know, as well as I do, that, while matters are in abeyance, she would be as safe with him as with her own brother, if she only holds true to herself. Anyhow it is on these grounds that I propose compromise to you—on your own terms—mind. And justice shall be done to Miss Standen—as far as our side can do it. I'll engage that, too. Do you understand me at last?"

Once more, the old turfite looked full at the other—not a common trick with him, by-the-way—this time with a devilish malice on his sensual face, that a painter of Hell-Breughel's school might have studied.

"Yes; I understand you quite well," he said, dropping every syllable deliberately. "I've listened to you very patiently, you must own. Now listen to me. You want to know what I'll take to draw stakes? Well—more than you could pay, if you mortgaged Warleigh to the last acre, and Mote to the back of that. You're fond of your boy—are you? So am I—so fond that I mean to keep him, and make a man of him before I've

done. And you'll see that my child has justice done to her? *I'll* see to that. She shall hold up her head yet, higher than the best of all your stuck-up madams, when he has made her an honest woman; she shall—"

A volley of blasphemy rather spoilt the effect of a speech, that would otherwise have been almost imposing, it was so bitterly in earnest.

In all phases of life you meet with strange anomalies and self-contradictions; but oftenest, I think, in natures essentially base or criminal. Has it not been often quoted as a characteristic of turf-men that they will forego almost a certainty of enormous gains in the future, simply because they *cannot* keep their hands off the crisp notes that once have fluttered before them? Jem Standen was an ordinary specimen enough of the class, not a whit more sagacious or resolute than his fellows; a few thousands (and here it was question *not* of a few) would have been a perfect God-send in the actual state of his finances; yet he was able to put the lure of immediate avarice aside, with a determined self-denial, worthy of the wisest that ever have toiled on through hard privations towards their appointed end.

True it is that the astute adviser, on whom he had chiefly relied from the first, had strictly enjoined the negotiator by no means to hearken to any present compromise whatsoever. But it is more than doubtful, if his soddened intellect and weakened will would have held fast to that counsel in the moment of trial had both not been backed up by the promptings of his temper—savage enough; like many other sluggish ones, when fairly roused. The temptation of administering one straight-forward 'facer' to the adversary who had punished him so sharply, was *too* irresistible.

A 'facer' it undoubtedly was; such as for a moment morally to stagger stout Tom Seyton. After the first emotion of surprise had passed, his anger began to rise rapidly, more so, perhaps, than it had ever done in his cheery, easy-going life. Looking back on the events of that morning with very mixed satisfaction—he always felt especially thankful that he was just able then to repress an outbreak of wrath. Had he vented it on such an object, Tom would never have shaken off the after-shame. As it was, he

answered coolly enough, apparently; but a taunt sprang forth, that at any other time he would have kept within his lips if he had bitten them through.

"Make her an honest woman? Did you ever hear King James's answer to his nurse, when she asked him to make a gentleman of her son? He said: 'I'll make him a baronet if ye will, Lucky; but the Devil himself can't make him a gentleman.' There, you may apply that story at your leisure. I've done with you. Here's your way." He threw the door open near which they were standing, and shouted through it, to a groom in the stable-yard. "They'll bring you your horse directly. You'll do your worst, of course; but I don't despair yet. Greater miracles have been wrought than rescuing that unhappy boy out of sic' hands as yours. One word more: you'll do wisely if you shift your quarters soon. Marlshire will be too hot to hold you after all this."

After that Tom Seyton turned on his heel and walked slowly back into the house; never heeding the coarse laugh of defiance with which the other answered those last words.

He spent some time with Mrs Maskelyne: doing his very best to cheer her, and to dissemble his own disquietude. Before he left, a letter was written to Brian, almost entirely at his dictation.—you may guess in what terms. They resolved to await the answer before taking any steps to trace the fugitives. Strong coercive measures—in the event of their being discovered—even Seyton allowed, it would be unwise and unsafe to use; for, if Brian were brought home, he could only be detained there during the remaining few months of his infancy; once his own master, he would be only more set on taking his own way.

So, again Tom Seyton rode homeward through the twilight, bearing evil tidings to Warleigh.

At the meet at Rylstone that day, there had been many speculations as to the cause of his non-appearance; but, in four-and-twenty hours, the news of Brian Maskelyne's folly had spread throughout the county; and all wonder at Seyton's absence ceased. The affair was the chief subject of cover-side talk for many a day after, but no one thought of questioning Tom Seyton; even the rough yeomen had tact enough to keep silence, or

change the subject, if they happened to be discussing it when he drew near. For all men knew how close was the old friendship subsisting between Mote and Warleigh ; and how nearly disgrace, lighting on one family, would of a surety touch the other.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN HIDING.

If Seyton was dissatisfied with the issue of the word-duel, it is certain that his elderly adversary did not return to his own place in a very jubilant frame of mind ; indeed, as he rode soberly back towards Torrcaster, his meditations were of the gloomiest.

The prospects of the joint-stock matrimonial company—such in truth it was—did not look very promising, so far : the risks swelled enormously, and the possible profits dwindled in like proportion, as Mr Standen contemplated them. He began to be heartily sorry that he had let Bessie go. The house would seem very dreary without her ; he did not look forward with any satisfaction to the society of his saturnine nephew ; guessing tolerably well what solace or encouragement might be expected from him. Furthermore, though he had affected to laugh them to scorn, he knew better than to disregard Seyton's last words, —whether they were threat or warning. Torrcaster would be no home for one against whom the face of Marlshire's favourite squire should be set in enmity. It was a nuisance too ; the place was central and convenient ; and he had been very comfortable there, on the whole. The hoary old profligate—who had ceased, one would have thought, for many a year to encumber himself with home sympathies—felt something like an honest pang at this last disturbance of his grimy Lares.

His nephew was abroad when Mr Standen reached home ; and he took the precaution to recruit his energies and fortify himself against catechising, with a hurried dinner, and divers drains of

extra strength. This was done so effectually, that when the Lawyer returned, he could get but very little out of his uncle of a coherent or satisfactory nature. Mr Standen was sullenly reticent, or obstinately obscure; and even made one or two absurd demonstrations of asserting his paternal dignity; hinting, that what had passed was his concern and no one else's, &c., &c.

Kit Daventry kept his temper admirably—he always did when there was nothing to gain by losing it—and listened quite patiently to the elder man's maunderings, intersprinkled with vague defiant curses (for Jem Standen, in the quarrelsome stage of drink, resembled the famous writer of Perth, who “stude in ta middle of ta road, and swoor at lairge”); till he had extracted nearly all the information he cared for at the moment.

This much was clear: all overtures of alliance had been positively rejected at Mote, without holding out the faintest prospect of relenting; but a heavy compromise had been offered, which the Torrecaster ambassador had indignantly declined. Seyton had acted throughout as the plenipotentiary of the other side; and the negotiations had scarcely been carried on, or broken off, with strict diplomatic courtesy. On this last point, indeed, Mr Standen seemed disposed to be rather more communicative; priding himself, as it were, on the truculence that he ultimately displayed.

“He ‘bested’ me above a bit, at first, Kit; but I gave him as good as I got before I’d finished with him. You couldn’t have done it better yourself—d—d if you could.”

This he repeated more than once, with many drunken chuckles; and, indeed, was muttering words to the same effect as he staggered off to his bed-chamber.

The Lawyer saw his respectable relative depart with contemptuous unconcern; only sending after him one aspiration of very doubtful benevolence. Then he mixed a huge tumbler of his wonted strong mixture, and fell to musing: no man ever saw Kit Daventry intoxicated; but he was one of the steady, silent, solitary drinkers, whose meditations are seldom dry.

“Couldn’t have done better, myself? Perhaps the old fool spoke truth there. I’m not afraid of many men; but, somehow, I don’t seem to care about tackling Tom Seyton, with his blood up. And I’ll pound it, it was up to-day. I’d have given some-

thing, though, to have seen that jolly face of his with a real storm on it. I can't think why I hate that chap so: perhaps I'll know before we die. Anyhow, I could have done no good, if I had been at Jem Standen's elbow: the father was bound to show himself alone, in that scene: it's not the poor cousin's turn to come on—just yet."

He laughed a low, soft laugh; that yet might have grated on the nerves of an indifferent listener: it was so infernally significant both as to the past and the future. Then, the current of his musings turned abruptly into a channel over which fell darker shadows.

"Suppose it were all to go wrong, after all? Perhaps it would have been best to take their money down, and have done with them. I wonder how much they would stand? No sum was mentioned to-day, I'll swear; or he'd have blurted that out, at all events. It's not too late now. We must see what the boy's name is worth, though, first; and we'll put it through the mill, before he's a week older. He needn't grudge paying for such a pretty toy as Bessie—pretty enough for a prince, for that matter."

As he paused again, a dark savage look came over his face; and his strong white teeth glittered above his lower lip, while they wrung it hard.

"I wonder how long he'll keep his promise? Not long—if she tempts him as she *can* tempt. Curse——no, I hardly mean that; perhaps she will be honest—in her own way."

He rose, and shook himself with an angry impatience.

"I don't know what's come over me to-night. I believe I should get jealous, if I went on maundering here: and that's a complaint I've never suffered from. I've been too poor and too busy, I suppose! it's like the gout; only rich old men ought to have it. I'll go down, and see if they've got a rubber at the Rooms. There won't be many more chances, here, of picking up money. We'll have to clear out of this before long—that's certain."

You see, the astute Lawyer had already indorsed Tom Seyton's warning. He left Torrcaster himself on the morrow, and did not return. His uncle only staid long enough to dispose of his horses and furniture. Then, he too disappeared; going no one knew

whither. It is only fair to relate that, if he left an indifferent reputation, he left no debts, large or small, behind him. Mrs Maskelyne received a formal note, containing a London address, in case she should wish, at any future time, to write to Mr Standen: the gentleman utterly declined to communicate with Seyton, verbally or by letter. The address was at a West-End hotel of rather indifferent repute,—‘to be called for.’ Then followed a long interval of silence and mystery; for from Brian never a word of answer came.

But to the chronicler all these things are clear. The rebel had not fled near so far as he would have made his people to believe: he had chosen—or rather there was chosen for him—a safer hiding-place than even Paris; the safest perhaps in the civilized world—a large London suburb. It is not worth while to define the neighbourhood more particularly: a dreary uniformity pervades all those out-posts of brick and mortar, that, year by year, testify to fresh inroads of the mighty army of masons, on the ‘greenery’ beyond.

The aspect of such places is rather depressing to a stranger. I have known men get quite silent and moody, on their way to pigeon-slaughter at Hornsey Wood; falling into gloomy speculations, as to what manner of people resided in the sombre villas, and how they contrived to exist there. But this especial neighbourhood is cheerful, and full of healthy excitement, compared to some others, farther to the East or South; where the craftsman seems to have exhausted his cunning, in producing a melancholy monotony of architecture. Only one thing on earth, I think, can beat them in this line—the long straggling street of an Irish village, built entirely of limestone seen on a real ‘soft’ Irish day.

In a Terrace, such as I have described, did Brian Maskelyne take up his quarters—uncomplainingly, if not contentedly. He was not under the same roof with his betrothed. She dwelt close by; under the protection of a convenient aunt, who had turned up just as the crisis when a *chaperon* was indispensable. Thither Brian had brought her, with all honour and honesty, straight from her father’s house. He spent most of his own time with Bessie, as a matter of course; but he had never once at-

tempted to claim a single privilege, beyond such as are universally permitted to avowed affiance. He showed infinite tact, in glossing over, or ignoring, the blunders of speech or manner to which the aunt was unfortunately liable; and sometimes perhaps he rather puzzled the worthy dame with his punctilious courtesy.

"I can't make out whether he's chaffing, or not"—she observed, once, rather sulkily.

To which the niece made answer, with a sort of disdainful impatience—

"Chaffing? He don't know the meaning of the word."

If all the world had witnessed their proceedings, Maskelyne could not have been more careful to avoid any imprudence that might compromise the fair fame of his intended bride. Kit Daventry allowed that much, when he had once seen them together; and, thenceforward, was careful to abstain from the ancient cousinly familiarity—at least in Brian's presence. Furthermore—the poor boy forced himself to take Bessie's connections as he found them; meeting them always cordially, or, at the least, courteously. But it was piteous, sometimes, to see the struggle with which he would repress an involuntary start or shudder; for never a day passed that did not bring some fresh shock to the instincts—prejudices, if you will—inherent in his pure proud blood.

The hardest work of all was to be consistently civil to Kit Daventry. Even when the latter meant to be most conciliating, Brian hated the crafty handsome face from the bottom of his soul; and almost preferred the sneering insolence, and affectation of superior worldly wisdom, that the other cared not always to conceal.

Mr Standen had introduced his nephew to his intended son-in-law, as the man of all others 'able to work the wires.' By which allegorical expression he wished the latter to understand that the lawyer was the properest person to put him in the way of procuring supplies that were urgently needed. To do Standen justice—he had never, from the first, disguised his own straitened and precarious means; so, Brian was neither very much shocked nor surprised, when Daventry suggested an

immediate interview with a certain money-lending celebrity.

Money-lending' is hardly the right word to use; for Mr Hart professed to have no personal interest in any of these transactions, beyond acting as middleman between the borrower and the capitalist. People took this profession—like many other assertions proceeding from the same quarter—with many grains of salt; but it was no one's interest to contradict—much less disprove—it.

CHAPTER XIV

AD LEONES.

LATE in the twilight of a foggy winter's day, Maskelyne and Daventry got out of a close cab at the quietest corner of the secluded street in which Mr Hart's modest offices were placed. When the noiseless door swung open by some invisible agency, the latter led the way in, with the assurance of one treading on familiar ground: of a truth, Kit had passed through that dim passage pretty often, though never in such good company as now

They found the famous attorney alone in his sanctum. So famous indeed was David Hart, and eminent in his peculiar line, that he well deserves brief biographical notice.

Of his origin or birth-place, absolutely nothing was known: taciturn on all subjects—he was unusually so with regard to his own early history; the most that was ever extracted from him being a vague admission that “his father had been unfortunate;” from which the more charitable inferred, that the said senior had been the hero of an extraordinarily fraudulent bankruptcy; while others affirmed that, under another name, he had incurred and endured the extremest penalties of the law.

However, David Hart's first appearance in the world was made some score of years ago, as an attorney in a very small way of

business; so small indeed, that he could afford to attend the principal race-meetings pretty regularly, without seriously neglecting the interests of his clients. It soon began to be noised abroad among the lesser fry of ring-men (not nearly so numerous then, as now), that, if any one wanted a modest temporary advance, on moderate security, and didn't mind paying for it, David was a pretty safe draw. From the very first, with an apparent rashness of confidence, he showed a supernatural sagacity in avoiding bad debts; like an old fox, he would pass by the daintiest bait, that had the taint of the trap about it. He would advance a hundred where no one else would have ventured ten; and, again, would refuse accommodation where everything seemed to promise fairly: in either case, it almost invariably turned out that the caprice had sound reason at the bottom of it.

Before long, he made professional acquaintance with two or three wildings of gentle birth, who could no longer afford to be fastidious in choosing their company; but roughed it, as best they could, in the tatters of smirched purple raiment. Thenceforward, it was easy to extend and elevate his connection; till, now, there was scarcely a great house in England concerning which David Hart could not have told tales—some, “too strange not to be true.” At least, so he himself averred; and, though the man was on occasions a measureless liar, he seldom indulged in purposeless or vain-glorious falsehood.

He had been employed, no doubt, in more delicate commissions than the mere raising of moneys on usury. When things had come to so hopeless a pass, that regular practitioners would have nought to do with them, people said—“Go to Davy Hart”—very much as they might have advised a friend in mortal sickness to try some kill-or-cure quack medicines, when all the resources of allopathy had been tried in vain. Truth to say, the remedy—even if successful—was often nearly as fatal to the patient's constitution as the disease could have been.

If the class of Mr Hart's clients had improved, socially speaking, the character of his transactions remained much the same; no really good or reputable thing ever came out of the office of that legal Nazarene. Indeed, to such he did not aspire: he had cast his lines too long in troubled waters, to care for anchoring

in quiet land-locked inlets, where there was safe holding-ground; he knew, well enough, that the heaviest fish and the greediest to boot, are taken in the ruffle of tumbling tide-ways.

But of business—such as it was—he always had his hands full. After the great race-meetings, his day was scarcely long enough to give audience to all the unlucky backers, who had been ‘plunging’ to such fatal purpose, that they were fain to seek David’s aid before encountering Black Monday at the Corner. The borrower was always sure of one of two things—a point-blank refusal, or the cash down; and the amount—so long as there was security to bear it—signified nothing. For, putting Mr Hart’s own resources entirely aside, there was at his back a knot of Hebrew capitalists (he had married late in life a wealthy daughter of the tribes), who could have taken up a Foreign Loan, among them, had they been so minded.

The outward appearance of the man was rather significant of his character. A short sturdy figure; with broad brawny shoulders, and a strong bull-neck, on which was set a square solid head, fringed with crisp grizzled hair: the face would have been common-place enough, if it had not been for a pair of deep-set black eyes, remorselessly keen, and lips braced and rigid. He had none of the unctuous civility, affected by many of his fellows, so disagreeably suggestive of deglutition; both voice and manner were brief and brusque, almost to rudeness.

At the first glance, a stranger felt that he had to deal with a person of no ordinary resolution. In truth it was so: there never breathed a more thoroughly dauntless man than David Hart. Endowed by nature with very firm nerves, he had acquired a large stock of the most useful—if not the most heroic—sort of courage; the courage of *Empeiria*. Nor was this wonderful; for, in his time, he had stood face to face with almost every phase of human desperation.

The offices, too, had a character of their own. In the outer room sate one or two sharp-looking clerks of rather tender years; who never seemed to do anything but take copies of correspondence, and go on hurried messages. The inner chamber, wherein Mr Hart received his clients, resembled a luxuri-

ous smoking-room rather than the solemn sanctum of a solicitor; the furniture was rich and massive, and the arm-chairs models in their way. There were hardly any law-books visible; but on a side table reposed the very latest editions of the works of the ingenious Sir Bernard; and not one of these crimson volumes had time to grow dusty from disuse. No piles of japanned deed-boxes lined the walls. Mr Hart knew better than to make a show with such ill-omened properties: the least imaginative stranger would have found in them a ghastly significance; such as would attach to things of price, adorning the cottage of reputed "wreckers." For, if in that office you had lighted on any muniments, you might have safely sworn that over the heads of their ancient owners deep waters had closed, long ago.

Indeed, sometimes, it seemed as if David took a cynical pleasure in making the line of demarcation between himself and the old-fashioned family solicitors as palpable as possible; he never disregarded etiquette more audaciously, than when confronted, in his own chambers, with these worthy men. There he would sit; rolling out volumes of smoke from an enormous cigar (he smoked incessantly, the rarest tobacco that money could buy) till his respectable *confrère*—what with physical asphyxia, and professional horror—would hardly be able to whisper faint remonstrances.

Mr Hart rose, slowly and indifferently, when his visitors entered; meeting them with very scant ceremony; indeed, to Daventry he only vouchsafed the coolest nod; while he indicated a chair to his companion, with the hand that still held the unextinguished cigar.

"It's rather late, Mr Maskelyne," he said, "and I have no time to spare. Kit Daventry has partly explained your business to me; but I should prefer hearing it from yourself. My first questions are always the same. How much do you want? For how long do you want it? What is the nature of your security?"

The harsh hard voice, with a decided coarseness of accent, jarred unpleasantly on Brian's sensitive ear. But for the questions themselves he was well prepared, and answered them as clearly and concisely as he could.

Mr Hart nodded his head twice or thrice, to show that he comprehended, and made a few brief pencil notes; his own face seldom told tales; but perhaps it was, just now, a trifle more discouraging than usual. He seemed to ruminate for more than a minute after the other had finished speaking; bending his brows, and growling to himself under his breath, as was his custom.

"The security is queer,"—he said at last,—"devilish queer; there's no getting out of that. It may be worth a hundred thousand; and it mayn't be worth a two-shilling stamp. I don't care so much for your being under age, Mr Maskelyne. I'm much mistaken if you're one of the sort that plead infancy and put their backer in the hole; (we must have another name, of course—if it's only Kit Daventry's there.) Compliments are not in my line, so you may take that for what it's worth. I haven't seen the will yet; but I've no doubt you've stated it correctly. You can't wonder, that the matrimonial clause staggers me. Boys will be boys—I don't wish to be impertinent—and you've only to run dead counter to your mother, to be comparatively beggared; for a life interest in £1000 a year is hardly enough to carry what you ask for—with the insurance and our interest. I'm quite frank with you, you see. You expect to pay well for accommodation, of course; you would never have come here, instead of going to your family solicitor, if you had not had your reasons."

Maskelyne bowed his head in assent, and seemed to reflect in his turn. Suddenly, he looked up and spoke, too rapidly for any one to interrupt him; that some one would have tried to do so, is most certain, had Daventry guessed what was to follow.

"I don't want to take your money under false pretences. I do intend to marry, and I have no hope, at present, of gaining my mother's consent; indeed, she has refused it already. So the penal clause will come into effect, if she chooses to carry it out. I do not think she will choose; but that is only my opinion. Now you know all the risks, you can decide if the affair will suit you."

The proud, dauntless look on the fair young face, became it

well. Mr Hart's lip curled somewhat less cynically than was its wont; but he appreciated yet more keenly—he had a grim humour of his own—the expression of Kit Daventry's. For once, the crafty schemer could not control his countenance; surprise, alarm, and vexation were written there, in characters that a child might have read aright. There was little of the heroic type about the famous David, certainly; but, at that moment, his feelings were not unlike those of the Lord of Luna, when—

He smiled on those bold Romans,
A smile serene and high;
He looked on the flinching Tuscan,
And scorn was in his eye.

"You're frank, at all events, Mr Maskelyne," he said. "It's best, perhaps, always to tell the truth to your lawyer and your doctor. I wish I could get all the world to think so. You shan't lose by it now. I'll deal with you neither worse nor better than I should have done if you had kept back that confession; if Kit Daventry tells you otherwise, don't you believe him. But, you see, you'll be entirely at your mother's mercy, if you once take a step that can't be recalled. You know how far you can trust to it—I don't. Is she very fond of you?"

Mr Hart put the question quite simply and naturally, like any other mere business inquiry; but it brought a dark red flush of passion on Brian Maskelyne's brow, and a wrathful flame into his eyes. He was prepared to bear a good deal in the way of humiliation; but not to hear his mother's love made a matter of discount and interest.

"I shall give you no further information," he said; rising as he spoke. "If it don't suit you to accommodate me, I'm only sorry to have taken up your time to no purpose; and I'll wish you good evening at once."

Mr Hart saw that he had made a blunder; but he was far from being disconcerted by such a trifle; sensitive scruples were entirely out of his line; he had no more innate delicacy than a wild boar, and nearly as tough a hide. Yet he was not a bit inclined to resent the rebuff; indeed he laughed—quite good-naturedly for him—as he answered Brian.

"You needn't be so hasty, sir. Once more—I didn't mean to be offensive. But one is obliged to be inquisitive, especially in such a risky affair as yours. I think I shall be able to manage it for you, if, as I said before, you're prepared to pay our price. I must look carefully into the will, of course. If you'll call here at the same hour the day after to-morrow I'll give you a final answer; and the money—if we make a bargain—as soon as the insurance can be completed. And you might as well come alone. I don't fancy umpires when I'm dealing with my clients, young or old. I stand on no ceremony with Kit, you see; we know each other pretty well."

Mr Hart certainly did not stand on ceremony with the worthy in question: he had not once, thus far, recognized his presence or existence, save by these conversational side-strokes—dropped in the careless, half-unconscious manner, with which a man at his meal throws scraps to a hound at his feet.

But the Lawyer had his temper under admirable control; and never let it loose when the luxury was likely to be expensive, as was the case, apparently, just now. He only pressed those wicked lips of his tight together, and shot one malign glance from under his thick black brows: then he said, with a hard, forced laugh:

"Yes: we're pretty old acquaintances—too old to quarrel, at all events. You've your own way of doing business, Davy; and I'm the last man to wish to interfere with it, or to meddle with what don't concern me. Mr Maskelyne will be just as safe in your hands, as if I were at his elbow."

Somehow Mr Hart did not seem at all propitiated by the other's evident wish to conciliate and concede.

"I think so," he said—very drily—answering only the last words, and turning abruptly from Daventry. "Well, good night, Mr Maskelyne; I shall expect you at the time I've named; and I hope to have good news for you—if it's good news to hear that you can buy money dear."

So Brian and his companion departed; separating, as soon as they were fairly in the street, without exchanging a word relative to the interview just concluded. David Hart smoked on in silence for several minutes after he was left alone; frown-

ing and muttering, as if rather discontented with his private thoughts. And thus they ran :

“It isn’t often I feel squeamish about a real good thing ; and this is one, I do believe—fishy as it looks. But if refusing him the money would get that pigeon out of Master Kit’s hands, he shouldn’t have a feather to flutter on, from me. It wouldn’t though. There’s more than pluck in those big eyes of his ; there’s the determination to go to the Devil his own way—if ever I saw it. So, he may as well pay toll to me, as to any other pike-keeper on the road.”

With that, Mr Hart arose and went his way ; first pitching his cigar into the grate, with a vehemence wholly disproportioned to the occasion.

If ever the memoirs of David the Great should be written (they would be much more amusing, and full of incident, than the last crack sensation novel), I trust that his biographer will touch, leniently and lightly, on the instance of weakness here recorded. It is the solitary one that—as far as the world knows—can be quoted against him ; and, doubtless, was afterwards amply atoned for, in other cases, by several gratuitous twists of the fœneral screw.

When Maskelyne returned at the appointed time, Mr Hart received him not a whit more cordially than before. He merely said that the money was ready, if Brian chose to take it on the terms then laid before him. Indifferent and careless as the latter was in all financial matters, those same terms almost startled him ; but he made no remark, after reading them twice through, except one of simple assent.

Mr Hart gazed at him, steadily and piercingly.

“Now, mark me,” he said in his harshest voice. “It’s just as well you should understand fully how things stand with you. In the first place, you cannot legally be bound by anything you sign now ; it’s a mere debt of honour till you are of age ; when, of course, you will complete the necessary deeds. That’s *our* risk ; for the second name on your bill isn’t worth the stamp. If you eventually succeed to the Mote property, your present incumbrance will be cleared off like a cobweb ; if you are cut down to the £1000 a-year for life, you’ll be little better than a

beggar. You will have to assign your life-interest to us, of course; and the residue, after paying interest and insurance-premiums, will hardly keep you in gloves, if you dress as you are accustomed to do. That's *your* risk. Only, if matters come to the worst, don't expect any leniency from us: you're fully warned."

Brian met the scrutiny without flinching: there was a shade of *hauteur* in the tone of his reply; but not a whit of anger. He had indeed a vague idea that the other meant well, in his peculiar way.

"I understand perfectly," he said. "I have to thank you for the trouble you have taken in making everything clear. I'm fairly warned, as you say. I don't complain of your terms now, and I shall not complain if circumstances should compel you to exact the last letter of your bond. Neither shall I forget that you have trusted to my honour. We may consider the matter settled, then?"

"Certainly: it will take nearly a week to complete the insurance; but you can have money sooner, if you are much pressed for it. You had better sign these bills now; and you can tell Daventry to call here, and write his name across them, early to-morrow. I understood, from the first, that secrecy is one of your chief objects; and I have not even suggested your asking any friend of your own to join you."

"Yes," Brian answered, more eagerly than he had spoken yet. "It is very important that no one connected with me should know of my being in town, just now. I'll do anything that is requisite; but I can't show myself, nor give my address, unless I know it is safe. Won't this make a difficulty about the insurance?"

The other laughed a short surly laugh; expressing confidence in his own powers, and pity for the innocence of his client.

"You may trust all that to me," he said. "It's part of our business to keep things dark, without asking why or wherefore. The sharpest detective in England would get no clue from any proceedings that I manage for you. There'll be no difficulty whatever about the insurance. The doctor can pass you here, if you like; and you can sign what's requisite here, too."

His rapid fingers kept pace with his tongue, all the while he was speaking; as he ended, he tossed over to Brian a cheque filled up to a large amount.

"That will serve you for the present, I daresay. Take care of it; it's to 'bearer,' you see. Any one can get it cashed for you."

So, with few more words they parted. But as Brian was leaving the room, Mr Hart laid his hand on his arm, and said, as if a sudden thought had struck him:

"One moment, Mr Maskelyne. I'm not your regular man of business; but, if I were, I wouldn't charge you anything for the piece of advice I'm going to give you; especially as it is hardly likely you'll attend to it. I don't ask you what you mean to do with all this money—a large sum, mind, for a man who can have few debts to speak of. But, it strikes me, you've got into a queer lot—a *very* queer lot—for one of your age and position to be mixed up with. *That's* no concern of mine either, you'll say. Perhaps not; nevertheless, I will advise you so far. In any affair whatever, that has to do with a woman, or a horse, do you back your own judgment, and act on your own impressions—rather than put yourself in Kit Daventry's hands. I'm not going to explain myself; but you may tell him what I've said, if you like. There, I won't detain you any longer. Good night. You shall hear when you are wanted."

And he almost thrust Maskelyne through the open door.

Brian did not think it requisite to mention to the Lawyer what he had heard. But he never quite forgot David Hart's warning; and had cause enough to remember it afterwards.

CHAPTER XV

THE WHITE FLAG.

SLOWLY and drearily the days crept on at Mote; as days will do heavy with hope deferred. The delicate beauty was

dying fast out of Emily Maskelyne's wan face ; and in her soft eyes there came often the haggard look —half eager, half weary, —common to all such as

Watch for steps that come not back.

Often, too, her brows would contract suddenly, as though from a spasm of physical pain ; and that significant gesture, the hand pressed quickly to the side, was terribly frequent now.

It was understood, as a matter of course, throughout the country, that ordinary visitors would not be acceptable at Mote.

Only a very few intimate friends called from time to time ; and to none of these did Mrs Maskelyne ever unclothe her lips on the subject of her sorrow, save to Seyton and his wife. These two came, not seldom ; though Tom always felt as nervous as a woman before going into that presence, and utterly depressed for hours after leaving it. Like most other men of his stamp, he was a very coward in front of a grief which he could not lighten. Tender and True have been coupled together many a time and oft ere this, since the day of the Good Lord James.

At last, Seyton's stout resolves so far yielded, that he offered himself to go in search of Brian, and to ascertain how things really stood, if he could not prevail upon the latter to return. It was a sore temptation, evidently ; yet Mrs Maskelyne withstood it. She knew enough of her boy's wilful nature, to be sure that any overtures, short of the one main concession, would only embitter him in rebellion ; and she had not yet come to the point of surrender ; more than all, she mistrusted her own powers of resistance, if they should meet face to face.

But soon, the restlessness that so constantly attends long bodily or mental pain began to possess her, unendurably. As Brian's twenty-first birthday drew near, his mother could no longer resist a morbid desire to find herself, on that day, anywhere rather than at Mote. Had they not often and often talked over together their simple programme of festivities ? And now what had it all come to ?

The old family doctor, who shook his grey head more dolorously with each visit, had more than once suggested complete change of air and scene, as a possible remedy, since all others

seemed to fail. Suddenly Mrs Maskelyne took him at his word. She only tarried long enough to provide herself with a travelling companion—a niece who had always been her favourite; and then started for the south of France and Italy.

Seyton—whom she consulted, as a matter of course, before definitely fixing anything—confirmed her strongly in her intentions; he, too, thought that anything would be better for the unhappy mother, than wearing her heart out slowly amongst familiar objects, endowed each with its own pang.

He strove very hard to speak the last words cheerily, as he leant over the door of the railway carriage in which Mrs Maskelyne half reclined,—she was falling fast into the ways of a confirmed invalid.

“Don’t worry yourself, if it’s possible to help it, with looking for news. I promise faithfully that you shall have them, good or bad, directly I have any to send. But besides that, Kate or I will write often; and you shall answer, whenever it won’t tire you. Miss Devereux—I shall never believe in a young lady’s nursing again if you don’t bring your aunt back to us quite strong and well.”

But Tom’s stout manhood nearly broke down just then; and his last “Good-bye” was barely intelligible, for a dry knot in his throat was choking him painfully.

The popular squire of Warleigh, with his merry nod or smile ready for every acquaintance, high or low, was most unlike the moody horseman who rode back through the streets of Torrcaster; speaking to none, and seldom lifting his bent head from his breast. The men who saw Tom Seyton’s face that day shook their heads afterwards more ominously than ever, when they blamed Brian Maskelyne’s folly, and speculated as to his future fortunes.

There are memorials existing yet—telling how, in old time, pilgrims, to atone for some deadly sin, travelled from one far country to another; halting often, and, at every station, enacting some fresh refinement of penance. Without consciousness of guilt, and without intention of self-torture, poor Emily Maskelyne went on a scarcely less woeful journey. Yet it could hardly have been chance that guided her; but rather one of those

strange distempered fancies, that are among the saddest symptoms of mortal decay. What else could have made her follow, step by step, the track that she had passed over two-and-twenty years before, in the first blush of matronhood?

George Maskelyne, without being a pedant, was what our fathers used to call an elegant scholar. He delighted in teaching his fair wife the traditions—legendary or historical—that make many bare plots of classic soil not less holy to the antiquarian than the ruins shadowed by Mount Palatine. He had a low, soft voice, especially pleasing to the loving ears that listened in those halcyon days. Very often the desolate woman—desolate both as wife and mother, now—heard it again, as she lingered over the ground they had trodden together.

And the features of each place were so wonderfully unchanged. When she halted by Trasimene, there was the same ghostly rustle and whisper in the reed-beds, that stirred them in the gloaming long ago, when those two stood by the dusky water; and George Maskelyne—warming with his subject, as men of peace will do when speaking of war—told the story of the Great Battle. How, in despite of omen and augury, the Consul led his legions to the onset, through the white shroud-like mist, that soon swallowed up standards and eagles; and how the darkling fight went on—no man heeding or staying his hand—though the ground was rocking with the earthquake, that laid walled cities in ruin, and changed the very face of Nature; till, at the last, Flaminius went down before the Insubrian's lance, and a hopeless struggle became desperate rout. There was the very pass through which the wild riders of Numidia came hurling into the press, from their ambush behind the shoulder of the hill; trampling down the fugitives in the shallows, or spearing them as they drowned, till lake and morass were merged in one hideous crimson swamp.

So on—southward ever—till she saw once more the primæval olives on the verge of the Sorrentine plain: not a leaf seemed to have fallen from the grey gnarled boughs, since she last rested under them; and heard that, under that same shadow, some of those who bore arms before Troy may have lain down to sleep.

But the sharpest pang of all came with the memory of the hopes and fears, that her husband had shared with herself, when

—long before their journey was done—they knew that there was promise of an heir to Mote. Heaven had hearkened once—once only—to George Maskelyne's prayer; and his house was not left childless. Had it come to this—that his widow should think in her heart that there might be crosses heavier to bear than the curse of barrenness?

No—many times, No. In the extremity of famine, the poor mother never forgot to be thankful for past years of plenty, when, from morning to evening, she feasted her eyes to their full on the sight of her darling growing up in strength and beauty, like a stately palm.

Famine.

Alas! the word was only too applicable now. No other could express Emily Maskelyne's intense craving for the tender words and caresses, that made up the one great delight of her quiet life. The night-season brought her no respite or rest; for her brief troubled dreams were ever haunted with—

The touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that was still.

There are separations harder to bear than those caused by one sheer sweep of the Death Angel's sword.

It was not wonderful, that the invalid's health did not improve on foreign travel, as physicians and friends had hoped. She herself, probably, nourished no such delusions, from first to last. But as summer faded into autumn (they were then once more in the north of Italy), Mrs Maskelyne grew weaker so perceptibly, that she resolved for many reasons to hasten her return. She saw her niece was getting more depressed and nervous, daily: and sharper and more frequent came the inward warnings to delay the setting of her house in order no longer: moreover she was possessed by the instinctive longing—common to so many creatures besides man—the longing to die at home.

So it happened, that an October evening found Emily Maskelyne once more at Mote.

Almost her first words were to ask if the Seytons were at Warleigh? When she heard that they were expected home from Scotland at the end of the week, she seemed quite satisfied; and rose the next morning in better spirits than she had shown for

some time past. Neither did the journey appear to have exhausted her as much as might have been expected. Even Miss Devereux was obliged to acknowledge this; though she remonstrated against her aunt's imprudence, when the latter announced that she had telegraphed for the family-solicitor to come down from town, for a long business afternoon.

But gentle Emily Maskelyne could be as firm, sometimes, as the most repulsive of strong-minded women; when she said—"Margaret, darling—don't think that I will over-exert myself; but—it must be so—" the girl felt it would be cruel to argue further. The legal interview did not last so long as she had feared it would—though more than one instrument was executed, which certain of the household were called in to witness. It appeared that the telegram had told the solicitor enough to enable him to bring all necessary papers with him.

But when he had departed, and the two women were alone again together, a great dread overcame Margaret Devereux,—looking on the change that those few hours had wrought in Mrs Maskelyne's face. Yet in this change there was nothing ghastly or startling: what was expressed there was hardly exhaustion; rather, a repose too intense to be natural—the solemn heart-calm, won only after long weary war.

Over that peace there falls ever an awful funereal shadow: it is such a one as broods in quiet churchyard nooks, where neither sun nor wind may wander—so thickly grow cypress and yews; if any light is cast thereon, it is a faint distant glimmer from the Light that may never be quenched, streaming through the half-opened doors of Heaven.

In answer to her niece's questions, Mrs Maskelyne would only allow that "she was a little more tired than usual:" indeed, she seemed to be in no pain, and was sleeping quietly when the doctor paid his evening visit. The old man sat by her side, waiting till she should wake; and his earnest eyes never moved from the sweet quiet face, till they grew hazy and dim. He had known and loved that face for more than a score of years; and he knew—now, without a glimmer of doubt—that he had a duty before him that night, from which the strongest and wisest of men are apt to shrink: the speaking of a death-warrant.

That duty, though, he did perform, so soon as he was left alone with the invalid after her waking: he said afterwards that, in his long experience, he had never seen the shock fall, to all appearance, so lightly; that it was no surprise, was very evident. The only point on which Mrs Maskelyne showed anxiety, was that of time: her eagerness was almost painful, as she asked, "if she might reckon at least on three or four days."

In her peculiar case, it was very difficult to speak with certainty: it was one, too, on which further advice was absolutely useless; even if the invalid had not owned to a nervous dread of seeing any strange physician. So the old doctor was fain to give her such poor comfort as he could hold out conscientiously. If no sudden shock assailed the system, it was most probable that Mrs Maskelyne would survive the fourth day. This seemed to pacify her, to some extent; for it was the Seytons that she was so anxious to see, and they were expected home late on the following afternoon. More than once it was on the doctor's lips to suggest that Brian Maskelyne should, if possible, be found; but he refrained. He knew no more than others did of the actual state of the estrangement; and feared lest he might produce agitation that would be instantly fatal.

Neither was Miss Devereux wholly unprepared for the heavy tidings: and she bore up bravely. But the next day was intolerably long; she was far more impatient for the evening that was to bring Seyton than the invalid herself, who lay still, hardly speaking or moving: it seemed as if she was husbanding the last grains of life, with a set purpose.

The twilight was closing in, when suddenly Miss Devereux started up with an exclamation of joy; the sound of rapid wheels had come so much sooner than she had reckoned on, that she forgot, for a moment, the doctor's caution. But the imprudence did not, apparently, do any harm. Mrs Maskelyne looked up, with only a quiet satisfaction on her face, and said:

"The Seytons! I am so very thankful. Will you ask *him* to come to me, first, alone? Kate won't think I'm unkind, I know, darling. You will sit with her, won't you, till I send for you?"

The groom from Warleigh had had the rare good sense to tell his master at Torrcaster how urgently he was needed at Mote; so he and Kate had driven thither straight from the station. With an intense relief and sense of reliance, Emily Maskelyne heard Seyton's step outside her door: those quick firm footfalls always seemed to bring with them comfort and courage.

Once more, in silence, their fingers were locked together; and, once more, the weak wasted hand was the firmer of the twain. But Seyton spoke first, he had hardly opened his lips, even to Kate, since he heard the evil news at Torrcaster; and, now, his voice sounded hoarse and unsteady.

"You never wrote one word of this: I might have come too late."

She looked up at him, with the faint smile that became so well the delicate beauty of her face.

"Why should I have written—only to make you sorry, too soon? And I knew you would come in time. But there is something worse, that you must forgive me—if you can. Let me tell you, while I am able; though I feel strangely stronger, since your wheels awaked me."

Emily Maskelyne's simple confession was very soon over, in spite of the breathing that grew, every minute, more laboured and irregular. On the previous day she had executed two deeds. In the first, she gave her full consent to the marriage she had hitherto opposed; in the second, she provided for the ceremony having been performed clandestinely; and exercised the powers thus accruing to her, by bequeathing everything, without reserve, to her son. There could not be a more complete or unconditional surrender; and Mrs Maskelyne hardly tried to excuse it.

"I know I have been weak, and wicked too—" she said. "I have betrayed my poor husband's trust; and deceived you. Ah, why did either of you trust me? Yet I did my best: I held out—indeed I did—till my heart was broken. I grew cowardly and false, when I felt that I must die soon. I could not die in peace—I could not lie quiet in my grave—if my own darling Brian thought I had dealt hardly by him—even if it

was hard justice. I had rather it was so: I had rather that he—and you—and any that care—should know that his poor mother loved him better than anything else in all the world—better than her own duty. But I could not have done this—and lived on to see, what I must have seen; and bear, what I must have borne. *That* would have killed me; and killed me in cruel pain. Now, I am spared all this: it is best—far best—so. Only say that you forgive me; and that you will pray that George may forgive me, too?”

Her voice, for a brief space, had grown quite strong and firm in its passionate earnestness; but, as she finished speaking, it sank into a whisper so faint as to be barely audible; and she lay panting painfully for breath; hardly able to swallow the cordial that Seyton held to her colourless lips.

Forgive?

The doubt need no more have troubled Emily Maskelyne than it need have embittered the death-pang of any martyred saint.

Had she confessed a mortal sin, instead of a weakness that the Mother of God might have owned, Seyton could only have spoken such words of kindly comfort as he tried to murmur then.

For her husband—his pardon, be sure, was granted already. The hearts that were tender and pitiful here below, will scarce become austere and stern when the mortal has put on immortality: not among the spirits of just men made perfect will hard measure be dealt to the frail ones of this earth, who—having borne their burden faithfully for awhile—sink under it at last. And, you will remember, this was no sacred trust, involving the welfare of a human soul; but only a prevision of pardonable family pride. Perhaps, even so great a thing as the mere worldly honour of his house had, for many a year, been to George Maskelyne among the trifles swept away like thistle-down by the first breath of Eternity.

“Don’t talk about forgiveness,” Seyton said, when he could speak plainly. “It is I who need to be forgiven, for having taxed your strength so cruelly. It is following my counsel that has killed you. But I believed we were acting for the best: God knows, I did.”

She took his hand, once more, into both her own.

"He does know it—good, true friend: He knows too how I thank and bless you in my heart. But, indeed it *is* best—so. I have something more to ask of you. Yes: I thought you would guess it." He would have risen from his seat, if she had not held him fast. "There is no reason why my boy should not come to me—now. You will find him and bring him, if it is possible?"

All Seyton's prompt energy returned, directly there was anything to be *done*: he looked at his watch, as coolly as if there had been no question of life and death; and spoke with his usual brief decision.

"I shall catch the mail from Torrcaster, if I start in ten minutes from this time. I don't fear much difficulty in tracing Brian. Standen's address will be clue enough, if it is followed up sharply. I do think you may reckon on seeing us here before noon to-morrow. Kate will stay with you of course, till I return: she would hardly let me come up alone, as it was."

Mrs Maskelyne bent her head gratefully; but still her clasp was on his wrist: she had evidently not said all her say.

"Two or three words more—only two or three"—she whispered. "I hope and pray that I may be spared to kiss my own darling, and press your hand once more. But even if God should rule it otherwise, I shall go to him quite peacefully and quietly, if you will promise me one other thing. You promised it years ago; but everything is so altered that nothing binds you now. In spite of all that has happened—that may happen—will you stand by Brian to the last? I don't ask you to countenance his marriage: I don't ask you to bring Kate here; or to come yourself, unless on urgent need. I do ask you—it is much, I know—never quite to desert my poor boy. He cannot escape sorrow, I fear, if he escapes shame; but he will only want your help the more. I have no near relations left: but I would rather trust Brian to you than to my own brother, if he were living still. Say you will do this: say it—so—with your hand in mine."

Halting between each sentence—between each word, at last

—her failing voice only just carried her through: but every syllable went as straight home to Seyton's heart, as if it had been uttered in the trumpet-tones of an Angel. On the bluff Saxon face there came a certain grave dignity—the dignity of strong sedate resolve:—

“I will stand by Brian to the very last, that I will; and help him to my very utmost, through good or evil report—be it ever so evil. He may choose to reject my help; but when I forget to render it may God forget me and mine.”

For a minute or more Emily Maskelyne lay quite still; no intelligible sound escaped her lips, that moved incessantly as if in earnest speech; but the eager tension of her features relaxed, as they settled into calm content—the foreshadowing, surely, of the peace that would be perfected soon.

After a few words more of no special import, Seyton went to fetch his wife. The brave little woman was the very person to be relied on, under such circumstances. For, though there were sorrow and sympathy enough at the bottom of her kindly heart, there was no fear of her breaking down. And—fond as she was of the Maskelynes—her friendship with the family was much more recent than that of her husband, and had never been knit so closely. So, it was but natural, now, that she should be less strongly moved than he.

It was full time for Seyton to be starting. His farewell words to Emily Maskelyne were very simple and brief: he had good reason to reckon on seeing her at least once more; and he knew how important it was to spare her further agitation. His hand was on the door, when he heard her voice—quick and hurried, as though some nervous panic had smitten her suddenly—

“You feel sure you will bring him back early to-morrow? Quite sure?”

It was ill for Seyton's after peace of mind, that he turned on the threshold to answer; for the dying woman's eyes met him full, and they followed him for many a day. In that last look there was an awful craving agony, yet not utterly hopeless; such as might be seen in the eyes of wrecked sailors, well nigh mad with thirst, when above the horizon mounts the small black cloud,

from which—if there is mercy in Heaven—some drops of precious water may fall.

That brief backward glance did more to unman Seyton than anything he had gone through yet. It was lucky the time was so pressing; for he could scarcely trust himself to mutter a few words of encouragement: then he closed the door quickly, and sprang down the stairs. Even so a man might flee from some haunted house, after meeting one of the fearful tenants face to face.

But his presence of mind came back before he had gone a mile through the cool night air: and his plans were all made before he reached Torrcaster. His own cattle were scarcely equal to another rapid journey; but he ordered post-horses to be kept saddled, so as to be ready to start at a moment's notice, on the arrival of the 'special' by which Tom proposed to return if his mission succeeded. There were no passengers that he knew by the up-train; and, so far, it was well: for he preferred his own meditations—gloomy as they were—to the torment of answering or evading inquiries.

CHAPTER XVI.

TOO LATE!

BETWEEN ten and eleven that night, Seyton drove up to the hotel where Standen had said he was to be found. It was not one of the regular 'sporting houses' which always look busy, if they do not seem especially cheerful or inviting; but, rather, one of those nondescript establishments to be found in certain West-end by-ways, about which hangs a dreary air of shabby gentility far more repulsive than the glaring vulgarity of other taverns. One fancies that the frequenters of such places must resort thither

—not for convivial purposes, or even for the ordinary pursuit of their calling—but to concoct some unusually deep robbery, or merciless ‘milking.’

Seyton soon learnt that the man he sought had not called at the hotel for some days. But there did not seem to be any mystery about his private abode, which was situated in the suburb above alluded to. Indeed, the landlord was disposed to be quite communicative on the subject.

“I’ve known the time, sir,” he remarked sagaciously, “when I’d have looked twice at my man, before giving Jem Standen’s address at this hour of the evening. It looks as if he was wanted, rather particular. But he’s no call to keep dark now; and hasn’t had, for some months past. I never remember him so flush of money: he must have been in some rare good things lately. It’s pretty sticky of him—not to have put any one of his pals on.”

Almost before the other had done speaking, Seyton was in his hansom again, and driving rapidly to the address he had obtained: he found the house after some little trouble; for the geography of these settlements is still rather vaguely defined.

The door was opened by an ill-favoured servant enough, with a sullen atrabilious face, bloated withal, and fishy eyes; in his shabby black, and dingy white neck-tie, he looked something between a mute out of place and a debauched dissenting minister—a fine full ticket-of-leave flavour pervading all.

In answer to Seyton’s inquiries, this personage stated that “his master was out, and he didn’t know when he might be in; but that Mr Daventry was at home, if that would do as well.” It appearing that such was the case, he bade the visitor, rather surlily, “wait where he was;” and after taking the latter’s name disappeared through a swinging baize-door into the interior of the house.

It seemed as if the servant had acted overmuch on his own responsibility, in making the above admission; for the half-muffled sound of sharp harsh words, ending in a bitter oath, reached Seyton’s ears, as he waited. But ere long the Cerberus returned more sulky than ever; and growled out something that might be interpreted into—“Come this way, please.”

During those few minutes Tom had leisure to reflect on Cer-

tain reports, relating to Kit Daventry, that had reached him since they last met in the street; for no personal acquaintance existed between them.

Rumour had not been kinder to Standen and his nephew, when they vanished from Torrcaster, than she is wont to be to better men whose backs are fairly turned. It is not astonishing, that men of their peculiar stamp will make almost any sacrifices to avoid being made the subject of public talk: they know, right well, that when the ball of gossip is once set going, it is impossible to say when it will stop; and the chance of a flash of light falling on some secret corners of their past life, is as terrible to them as the gleam of a dark-lantern might be to a robber whose profession is avowed. This thought was in the Lawyer's mind when he said, in his soliloquy—"We'll have to clear out of this, before long." He guessed, too, that he himself would be more roughly dealt with, by common report, than his uncle and confederate.

So indeed it turned out. Long ere this, Seyton had been made aware that there was not a more shameless scoundrel living, than the man with whom he was now seeking an interview

The room in which Kit Daventry gave audience was comfortable enough at first sight; but the new, costly furniture was beginning to look dirty and tarnished already: it was no wonder; for the atmosphere was laden with the close acrid fumes of stale smoke and strong liquors, so as to be nearly unendurable to healthy lungs.

The Lawyer's appearance and demeanour, that night, were by no means prepossessing. The anger, only half vented on the awkward servant, lingered still in his scowling eyes and black lowering brows: the visit was evidently both unexpected and unwelcome; and this he did not take the trouble to disguise. He rose as Tom entered, bending his head with a surly civility (which was not acknowledged), and spoke abruptly; without going through the needless form of offering a chair.

"May I ask what you wanted with my uncle? If it's a mere matter of business, perhaps I can speak and act for him. I presume you would not have come here on any other—after

what passed between you when you met last. Indeed, I happen to know that Mr Standen would not have seen you if he had been at home. It was a mistake that you were let in at all."

The man's manner was coarsely offensive; but his tone was free from the slang vulgarity that usually characterized it; and all his cool cunning could not conceal that he was, for some reason or another, very ill at ease.

"He *would* have seen me"—Seyton answered, very quietly. "But you will do just as well: for my business cannot be simpler. I want Brian Maskelyne's address, at once: I must see him without a minute's delay. It is a question of life and death."

The scowl on Daventry's face grew blacker yet; and his teeth gleamed through his beard, as he almost snarled out his words:

"I thought as much, by —— I did. So you think you're to ride rough-shod over us—I know some of what you said to Jem Standen and guess more—and then come and find us ready at your beck and call, to help you to your ends? Brian Maskelyne's of age, and his own master. If he'd wanted to see you, he'd have told you so himself. But he's too much spirit for that. *He* won't be the first to give in." (Tom remembered afterwards, the raising of the voice just here; and the furtive glance at the folding-doors that closed the farther end of the room.) "And you want his address? My uncle would have given you the same answer as I do—I'll see you d—d first."

The rude ferocity of the speaker's manner was so strangely at variance with his habitual sneering coolness, that a child would have guessed he was blustering to keep up his failing courage. And there was some reason for this. Do you remember one sentence in a certain soliloquy—

"I would have given something to have seen that jolly face, with a real storm on it——"?

Kit Daventry had the opportunity of enjoying that spectacle now, gratuitously.

With all his kindness of heart and easy-going ways, Tom

Seyton was somewhat choleric by nature: he had not been in a quarrel since he left school, more serious than a poaching fray; but he was no more likely to brook insult patiently, than the 'humane' King of Connemara. He thought, in his conscience, that Emily Maskelyne's death lay, chiefly, at the door of those who had beguiled away her son, and confirmed him in rebellion. The arch-schemer—as he had reason to believe—stood there now; insolent and defiant, as though conscious of the triumph, that was, in truth, already won. And this—when every second was priceless; and the briefest delay, a wrong done to her who lay yonder in her mortal agony. Then—keener than ever—rose the memory of the terrible look that, ever since he met it, had been driving Seyton onward, like a goad. His intentions and cause were good, certainly; but the savage devil that, for the moment, reigned in that honest breast, might have prompted the hand of Cain.

"Look here"—Tom said, speaking very low. "I haven't time to bandy words with you. You'll give me that address within the minute, if you're wise. For I'll have it out of your throat—by fair means or foul."

As he spoke, he moved slowly nearer and nearer to the other—his own face transformed past recognition; and with a fell meaning in his eyes, before which a bolder villain than Daventry might have quailed.

But the Lawyer was a coward to the core of his knavish heart. He was much the taller, if not the more powerful man of the two; and sparring had formed part of his education. Indeed, he was reckoned rather a dangerous customer in those brief midnight broils, that are generally decided by the first blow or so, where neither pluck nor stamina find much room for display: that big diamond ring was worn for use no less than ornament; the sharp facets would cut a temple-vein as with a poniard stroke. But, on the present occasion, he seemed to put but small trust in the resources of 'science;' and evidently preferred a non-combative policy. Help was very near, of course; but this—if he remembered it at all—did not embolden him to play the bullying out. Perhaps he felt much as Wycliffe did, when quoth the grim buccaneer—

Might I not stab thee, ere one yell
Could rouse the distant sentinel?

There is hardly a creature on earth so helpless as a cool cunning man fairly distraught with fear.

As Seyton drew nearer, Daventry put up his hands; but it was only to deprecate violence, and to entreat parley

"Don't—don't—be so hasty"—he stammered; with a change of manner, that, under other circumstances, would have been irresistibly ludicrous. "I'll give you the address, if—it's really a question of life and death, you say"

Tom was too earnestly intent on one object to notice the miserable evasion—it could hardly be called self-deceit—with which the other strove to cloak the dastardy of a surrender at discretion. His own face was still very stern, but the fierce menace gradually faded from it, as he answered, in the same suppressed voice—

"I said wrong: it is a question of death only. Brian cannot hope to see his mother alive, if he reaches Mote after noon to-morrow."

What Daventry's reply would have been—whether he would have attempted the lie of condolence, or allowed his sordid anxieties to appear—can never be known.

Before he could open his lips, the folding-leaves behind Seyton burst open with a rattle, and Brian Maskelyne stood there; clutching the door-handle like a drunken man, as he swayed to and fro; his great black eyes gleaming unnaturally; his fair smooth cheeks blanched to a dead opaque whiteness.

By dint of pondering on the shame and sorrow, already wrought by the wretched boy's wilful madness—to say nothing of what must surely come thereafter—Seyton had contrived, up to this moment, to keep his anger warm; but, at that ghastly apparition, all resentment was swallowed up, in pity for the awful punishment that, he saw, had already begun. He entirely forgot the presence of a third person, as he turned to meet Brian, with outstretched hands, and a smothered exclamation of welcome.

But Maskelyne shrank back, repelling the other's advance,

as if he himself were plague-stricken; and spoke to Daventry, with a horrible quavering laugh, that made Tom's blood run cold.

"Didn't I tell you it would be so? It *has* killed her. But I've shown a proper pride - as you call it—and we shall have our own way, at last."

A strong gripe was on his arm, before he could utter another word.

"This is no time for reproaches"—Seyton said—"far less for reproaches wasted on *him*. Surely you will come with me, this instant?"

Brian bent his head, and followed, submissively: in the doorway he turned, and looked back at Daventry, who still stood sullenly apart, in a bewildered helpless way.

"You'll let Bessie know"—he said. "She'll guess why I could not tell her myself, or write one line—to-night."

The next minute he was in the street, at Seyton's side.

The Lawyer drew a long breath, when they were fairly gone; and, turning to the table, filled a glass brim-full with brandy: his hand shook so, that he could scarcely carry the dram to his lips unspilled.

"That's well over"—he muttered. "I didn't see my way out of it, five minutes ago. There's madness in that boy's blood, I do believe. And, as for the other—d—n him—I know, now, why I always hated him so. I'd sooner face a dozen roughs, than those infernal eyes of his, when the devil comes into them, as it did to-night; and I'd as soon trust my neck in a halter, as in his fingers, if he meant mischief."

As he mused on, his brow began to clear; and the wicked, sneering smile curled his lip once more.

"It looks very much as if the big *coup* were coming off, after all. It isn't likely that the mother will die game: she wouldn't have sent for her pet to tell him he was cut off with a shilling. I wonder where that tipsy old fool has got to: he's later than usual; he won't be fit to talk to, either, when he does come in. So I'll go down and tell Bess the news. Good Queen Bess! Here's her health; and *there's* for luck."

He pitched the empty glass into the grate, with that low *sournois* laugh, described before; and, without more ado, went forth into the night.

Brian only spoke once, on their way to the railway.

"Why was I not told of this sooner?"

"I only knew it myself six hours ago"—was the reply. Not another word passed between them till they got out at the station.

It may be well to mention here, that Brian's presence in Standen's house that evening (which looks very like a stage-trick) was the most natural thing imaginable.

He was not yet a-weary of the beauty for which he had paid such a fearful price: but the most infatuated bridegroom—aided and abetted by a more sentimental companion than the fair Bessie—might own, before his happiness is two moons old, that some slight distraction to the monotony of love-making is not to be despised. Putting his wife aside (for wife she had been, these months past), poor Brian had not the chance of interchanging a single idea with a congenial spirit: he had never cared much for reading; and, in the *incognito* which for obvious reasons he was compelled to observe, amusement and employment were alike out of his reach. His dislike and contempt for Bessie's male relatives—for the cousin especially—had increased well-nigh to loathing. Nevertheless—from pure lack of something to occupy his thoughts, when not amatively engaged—he had interested himself in the turf-speculations of the pair. This especial night was the eve of a great race-meeting; and Brian had gone down to his father-in-law's house to settle, finally, how his money should go on: not finding the latter at home, he had remained to talk over matters with Daventry.

They had been warned at the terminus that a 'special' would probably be needed; so it was not as long as might have been expected before all was ready for a start. Whilst they were waiting Seyton took some hasty refreshment—it was many hours since he had tasted food—and tried hard to make his companion follow his own example. Tom had a decided belief as to the relation of the physical to the moral powers;

and he guessed that both would soon be sorely tried. But Brian rejected everything but soda-water, which he drank eagerly unmixed with spirit. Perhaps he was right: there was evidently fever in his veins already; for two round scarlet spots shone out on his white cheeks; and his hand was, by fits and starts, burning, or deadly cold.

Not long after midnight, they were plunging forwards through the dark, at the speed that can only be got out of a light-loaded engine, with the rails clear in front, for hours to come. And, still those two were very silent: yet a few words Seyton forced himself to speak. He held it shame, that one stone of the wall, built up of late between Brian and his mother, should stand while his hand could pluck it away. So, as briefly as possible, he told how Emily Maskelyne had yielded every point in dispute: and had forborne to visit, even with the lightest penalty, her son's fatal rebellion.

Not a gleam of triumph or satisfaction dawned on Brian's dreary face, as he listened. Only the big storm-drops, that had been gathering slowly under his long dark lashes, rolled down, one by one. But he made no answer; and thenceforward to the journey's end, kept his eyes constantly closed—evidently not thinking of sleep, but to show that he wished to be left entirely to himself: this fancy the other was only too ready to indulge.

As Seyton studied his companion's visage more attentively, he felt surprised at himself for not having noticed, at the first glance, how much it was changed. It was not its exceeding pallor which struck him so painfully; for that was natural just now; neither were the features unhealthily emaciated; but Tom would rather have seen signs of past or present disease, than the weary care-worn look of premature age. Yet it was not the thought of what Brian must have gone through, that made his old friend so sad; rather, it was the certainty of what the future had in store. Ill fares it, surely, with him, who, in the battle of life, has a sore wound under his maiden harness, ere the onset is fairly sounded. No wonder that, while Seyton gazed on the work of the last few months, he should have remembered the gloomy text—

"If they do these things in the green tree, what shall be done in the dry?"

They were scarcely delayed five minutes, after reaching Torrcaster: the posters were standing ready saddled, close to the station; and every one was on the alert. The cause of Seyton's night journey had been noised abroad; and there was not a true man in Marlshire, who would not have given his best horse to forward that errand. The driver had his master's orders to spare neither whip-cord nor steel, and carried them out with a will. The famous elms of Mote rose, gaunt and grey in the early dawn-light, as—still at a furious gallop—they swept through the open lodge-gates, and up the main avenue; caring nought if the thundering wheels gave warning to those within. What is prudence with the sick, is mockery with the dying; and there is small need of caution, when hope is past.

As the swing of the carriage at the turn threw Seyton against his companion, he felt the other shiver as though in an ague-fit. There was nothing but pity in his heart, be sure, just then; yet his voice sounded sharp and stern, as he pressed Brian's arm—

"You must command yourself—in mercy to *her*."

The strong hand seemed to have a magnetic force of its own, for the other ceased to tremble; and said, quite steadily, though in a whisper—

"You may trust me."

Before another word was spoken, the carriage drew up before the huge Norman arch that shadowed the entrance. Brian Maskelyne was at home, once more.

Seyton sprang out first; but—quickly as he moved—a stream of light poured through the opening door before he was fairly on the threshold; and Kate cast herself on his breast, as he came in.

He knew it all at once—knew that his journey had been utterly in vain; for, in spite of his good speed, Death had travelled yet faster—knew, that he had not been able to lighten, by one whit, the remorseful burden that Brian Maskelyne must bear thenceforward for ever. He knew all this before Kate could murmur through her tears—

“Too late! Too late!”

If those words—ominous at all times—fell on Seyton’s heart like drops of lead, how, think you, did it fare with that other close behind, who—clasping his hands over his writhen face, like a man stricken blind—staggered back into the outer dark, with a bitter wailing cry?

This was what had happened at Mote that night.

For an hour or more after Seyton’s departure, Mrs Maskelyne seemed to doze; at least, she lay quite still, with closed eyes, breathing regularly. But she woke up, all at once, panting and scared, as though from some evil dream; and asked, eagerly, for the parish-priest, who lived hard by; indeed, the rectory stood within the park-wall. He was not long in coming; for all the evening through, he had been expecting the summons. By the time he arrived, Mrs Maskelyne was quiet again; and, outwardly, was more composed than any one of the women who shared her last sacrament. But the valediction of the Church was scarcely spoken, when there came on a spasm of pain, more swift and terrible than any that had preceded it: before it ended, the least experienced of those present knew, that they were standing in the solemn fore-shadow of the Dark Valley

At last the cruel throes that shook every fibre of the wasted frame, grew fainter and rarer; till, under the strong stimulants, Emily Maskelyne revived enough to speak once again. She looked up at the doctor, who had held her in his arms all through the paroxysm, and said, quite distinctly—

“Then it is nearer than you thought—much nearer?”

“You will suffer no more pain”—the other answered in a hard constrained voice: he could frame nothing better than that brief indirect reply; for he had not been so unmanned, since he stood by his own daughter’s death-bed, many a year ago.

She drew herself free from his clasp, with a strength that surprised all who saw the effort; still gazing up into his eyes; but now, with a wild eagerness in her own.

“I can bear pain—any pain—if I may only see Brian once more for a few minutes—a very few. Cannot you help me to

this? I will take anything you give me. Ah, do, in pity, try."

The doctor's sturdy frame quivered like a willow-wand from head to heel, as he spoke, hoarse and low—

"I believe, that no science could say more than this—It is as God wills. Yet it is hard, that you have only my poor skill to appeal to. I ought to have been more firm about calling in a better opinion."

The gentle heart, that had never refused pitiful charity to any breathing creature, asserted itself even amidst the bitterness of death. Emily Maskelyne felt actually repentant, as she saw self-reproach on her old friend's honest face. She pressed his hand hard as she sank back on her pillow.

"Do not say that; it makes me feel so ungrateful. No one could have done more for me; and I should not have been happy in any other hands. You said well—'It is as God wills.' I will try not to murmur any more. Let me rest now."

And so she lay for many minutes, never stirring lip or muscle; though sometimes they heard a sound like a smothered moan; and a tear or two, at long intervals, rolled from under her heavy eyelids. When she roused herself, she beckoned the women who were present to her side, one by one, and gave to each a farewell kiss. But she spoke never a word, till Kate's face was touching her own: then the slow, weak whisper came—

"Kiss my own boy, for me—my poor boy. And tell your husband—I trust——"

Her voice died away in a long labouring breath; and no other intelligible syllable passed Emily Maskelyne's lips, though they were moving often, as if in inward prayer. After this, Kate thought, she suffered no pain; and life departed in a faint fluttering struggle, like the agony of a wounded bird.

Does all this seem to you who read unreal or improbable—the overwrought creation of a romancist in search of a sentimental episode?

Peradventure it may be so. Not being well up in cardiac physiology, I am scarcely prepared, at this moment, to prove that a 'broken heart' can slay so swiftly and surely, unaided by mortal organic disease. But if such a malady does exist, I do honestly

believe that the mothers who have sunk under it would outnumber—ay, ten to one—all the lovesick maidens that ever wore wreaths of willow.

CHAPTER XVII.

DILETTANTI.

AND all this while, Vincent Flemyng tarried still in Rome. Yet his success had hardly been so great as might have been expected, considering the advantages under which he started there. For his introducer was more familiar with the place than most of the natives, and—albeit young in years—had long ago been gifted with the freedom of the Eternal City.

The father of Vesey Ferrars had been an amateur painter of no small renown, and still more celebrated as a collector: he himself had never ventured on anything more ambitious than some meek water-colours, and rarely trusted to his own judgment in picture-purchase; but there was born, and abode with him, a great veneration for Art, and affection for artists.

As a rule, the modern Mæcenas is, simply, a social nuisance. Even poor patient, penniless Phormio must be sorely tried sometimes, by that pompous benevolence, and condescension measured out by the grain; while to the disinterested public such patrons are absolutely intolerable.

But amongst those affable tyrants, Vesey was not numbered. He hated the very word ‘munificent;’ and would have resented its application to himself as a personal insult. When he gave a good price for a good picture, he did not consider that he was conferring the slightest obligation; neither did he think that the possession of one of the best private galleries in Europe warranted him in overbearing the professional opinions of better judges. He had learnt the secret—rare amongst men of his class—of being able to render help without implying

patronage: help, too, in right good season. His name was of evil odour in the nostrils of certain dealers, dwelling in the precincts of Soho. Not unfrequently, when they had nearly clinched an admirable bargain, by the simple process of putting on the screw, they came back to find that a timely visit from Vesey Ferrars had enabled the intended victim, for the nonce, to laugh at their beards: so the baffled middle-man was fain to depart; muttering words much akin to those that issue from the mouths of wreckers, when they see a stranded vessel go suddenly afloat.

I think such curses must be as well worth earning as the blessing of a mitred bishop.

In truth, Ferrars was such a thoroughly good fellow, and had so many tastes congenial to their own, that the artist-guild would have welcomed him enthusiastically, had he come among them with never a plack in his purse. But—*abondance de bien, ne nuit jamais*: they were quite content to take him, with all the great possessions on his back that he carried so lightsomely; and the most cynical of the caricaturists forbore, even in secret, from making a mock at his Vandyck beard, and mediæval eccentricities in velvet—small vanities to which Vesey was notoriously prone.

His acquaintance with Flemyng was not of long date; it had sprung up while Ferrars was paying a brief visit to a younger brother at the same college: but he began to take an interest in Vincent from the moment that he discovered the latter's artistic propensities. These were not very definitely developed at that time; for it was in the days of rose-coloured anticipation, when Flemyng reckoned on academic triumph as a certainty; and proposed to choose a profession at his ease. Yet, even then, it was settled that he should bear Ferrars company that winter to Rome.

Things were greatly altered now. But Vesey's sympathies were only enlisted more strongly, when he learnt that the other meant, henceforward, to follow painting as a profession, instead of an amusement. He was wont to look on the silver side of every man's shield: so, it is not wonderful that he should have given Vincent credit for much more earnestness—to say nothing of talent—than was in that weak unstable nature.

There was ever jubilation in the studios when it was known that Vesey Ferrars had come to the fore again: before he had been twelve hours in Rome, he heard 'Welcome' spoken in nearly as many languages; and never a man of them all but meant what he said heartily and honestly, without flattery or hope of advantage. There was usually a sort of chronic 'feed' going on during the first week after his arrival: but, on the present occasion, Vesey himself gave an entertainment of unusual splendour—not to say, solemnity—which taxed the resources of the Lepre to the very uttermost; not so much in the way of cooking, as of accommodation.

Only men of some mark were bidden to this banquet, at which Vincent Flemyng was recommended to the good graces of the whole cosmopolite fraternity: the host would have had every member of it there, had it been possible; and was hardly contented with that crowded representative chamber. The guests were all in high good-humour, and anything but critically disposed; moreover, Vesey Ferrars's voucher had always, hitherto, been found more or less trustworthy: nevertheless, on several of those present Vincent Flemyng's first appearance did not leave a favourable impression.

He was pleasant and polite enough, certainly; did not obtrude his own opinions, and listened to those of others with an agreeable deference; seemed determined to be pleased with everything and everybody. But artistic eyes—accustomed to watch and chronicle every varying expression of the human countenance—are very keen observers: some did not fail to remark, that little heartiness lay beneath the smooth surface-courtesy; and with such, the supercilious curl of the upper lip could not pass current for a smile.

Old Dick Haddo, who has hung about Rome these thirty years—doing nothing on earth but deliver art criticisms (which are really valuable), since a misguided relative left him a modest competence—till he has come to be considered the *Doyen des Ateliers*, on the morrow embodied the feeling of more than one malcontent, in his own coarse, slip-shod language.

"Don't tell me it was the garlic got into his nose"—the irascible senior grunted, in answer to a meek apologist. "I saw

it turn up before the *olla*—devilish good it was, too—came into the room. The company wasn't good enough for him—not such as he'd been used to—that's about the mark of it. As if what was good enough for Vesey wasn't good enough for *him*! We'll have to be civil, of course; but—you mind me, boys—that chap will never let us be more, if we wished it ever so."

Yet the opposition was decidedly weak, numerically; and Vincent Flemyng had a good working majority in his favour, to start with. His personal appearance was decidedly attractive; and this goes further, perhaps, with the artistic lot than with any other purely masculine confraternity; his manner too was soft and pleasant enough—bar the covert superciliousness; and there was a sort of suppressed brilliancy in his conversation, as if he could be more clever, if he would: moreover, in the few sketches that he had troubled himself to finish, there was undeniable promise.

That was the most provoking—though not the worst—side of Vincent's character. He was always promising: as for performance—*Altro*.

All things, however, considered, he got, as was aforesaid, a remarkably good start. Before Vesey Ferrars went southwards, he had done his friend a last good office, by gaining for him admission into a famous studio, whose doors, as a rule, were only opened to pupils who had already won a certain reputation. So—having omitted nothing that could set Vincent forward on his way—he left him, with great confidence, to the mercies of the Future.

But the old desultory lack of purpose, and over-weening self-confidence, that had marred the scholar's success, hung round the embryo painter, like a loose cumbrous robe: he had no idea of 'stripping to his work,' much less of toiling slowly and steadily onwards, with strain of limb and sweat of brow.

However, truth to tell, before he had time to settle fairly down in his new pursuits, there came a temptation into his life, that might have been a reason—if not an excuse—for idleness, in a more earnest enthusiast. I doubt gravely if Pygmalion achieved any triumph worth mentioning, after it seemed good to Erycina to grant his prayer.

You guess what I mean, of course?

Marion Charteris was punctual to, what we needs must call, her tryst; and thenceforward, for many a day, Art had but a fickle follower in Vincent Flemyng.

Everything happened exactly as the fair dame had predicted, or—promised. Her liege lord certainly escorted her to Rome; and saw her luxuriously established in a breezy *primò piano* on the slope of the Pincian, with an ample credit at Torlonia's. Having done this, John Charteris considered himself clear, for the present, of marital obligations; and devoted the rest of his spare time to his invalid sister. He made little difference betwixt any of his social duties; going through them all—whether as magistrate, legislator, landlord, or head of a family—with the same stolid solemn pertinacity; striving to render to every one his or her due, and never a whit more. Before the week was out, the bucolic nostalgia had possessed him, and he had started homewards; leaving his fair wife to her own devices, without a single doubt or misgiving; unless such were implied in his parting warning—

“Mind you wrap up well at night, Marion. Chills are very dangerous, here.”

During that week Flemyng kept himself very much in the background: he had tact enough to know, that it would be unwise to dissemble his presence altogether; so he called once, when Mr Charteris was nearly sure to be out, and Marion was equally sure to have some female friends with her. He need not have troubled himself to be diplomatic: it is more than doubtful if John Charteris noticed that particular card amongst the heap of others; if he did, it is most certain that it did not cost him a second thought.

But, when King Katte's back was fairly turned, bright eyes began to gleam out of the dark corners of the Mause-Thurm; and, ere long, the innocent games began.

Vincent Flemyng could not exactly take up the flirtation at the point where he had left it—few men have the luck to do that—but he found Marion only too ready to avail herself of his escort on all possible occasions, and to accept his homage—uttered or implied. Indeed, the two were almost inseparable, though seldom—so far as the world knew—alone together. Loitering

through picture-galleries of a forenoon—riding homewards over the purple Campagna through the deepening shadows—lounging in the twilight *palchi* of the Tor di Nona—withdrawn a little from the crowd of dancers thronging the saloons of Grammont, Doria, or Colonna—that pale discontented face was never far distant from Marion Charteris's ‘shining shoulder.’

Discontented it was : for, day by day, the conviction forced itself more gallingly on Flem yng, that he was wooing a phantom, and striving to grasp a snow-wreath. His overweening vanity made him slow to recognize the truth ; but he did recognize it at last, with a bitterness of spirit hard to describe. Yet the idea of relinquishing the pursuit never crossed his mind for an instant ; and this pertinacity arose rather from weakness than strength of character.

A practical profligate, resolute of purpose and will, would soon have brought matters to a climax ; and—if unable to bow another neck to the yoke—would, at once, have broken it from his own. But Vincent was a very tyro, in everything save theory. Moreover, his passion—breaking out, at times, in fierce fitful flashes—was by no means an all-consuming flame : it never engrossed him to the extent of making him insensible to the temptations of high play, to which he became, daily, more and more addicted. Also, he was well aware, that the position of *cicisbeo* to a famous beauty gave him a certain social importance, though not of the most creditable sort ; and—

He dared not put it to the touch,

To win or lose it all.

So—occasionally indulging in feeble efforts at rebellion—he followed still in the train of his fair conqueror ; a querulous but not unwilling captive. Yet, Marion Charteris paid more than a nominal price for her amusement.

There are women who—relying, let us hope, on their final integrity of intention—will compromise themselves more for coquetry than others will do for crime. She, of whom I write, was one of these. Something, perhaps, ought to be set down to her deficient moral training ; something more to the reckless nature inherited from the wild old robber-knight, her father : but with all this given in, it must be owned that Marion's conduct, about this time, was imprudent in the extreme.

In most places, there would have arisen a scandal blatant and venomous. But Roman society—though free from Florentine licence—is rather inclined to lenient short-sightedness in such matters. The natives have their own little affairs to attend to; and trouble themselves not at all with alien peccadilloes: whilst, under soft Italian skies, the British *Censor Morum* notoriously mitigates the terrors of his front, and the rancour of his tongue.

Yet two women did take up their parable against the error of Mrs Charteris's ways—her aunt and her sister-in-law. Of the first, Marion was rather fond; and she met that remonstrance with a gay contemptuous good-humour.

"A boy like that bring your pupil to grief! *Pas si bête, ma tante*. Poor Vincent means no more harm than—I do. We've known each other ever since we left our nurseries, you know. Indeed, I consider him quite in the light of a sheep-dog: and there are plenty of wolves prowling about here; I shouldn't feel safe, quite alone."

To which the other replied, with some asperity, that "she didn't believe in nursery-friendships; or in male sheep-dogs of tender age; or in—"

"What *do* you believe in, Aunt Milly?" Marion asked, simply.

This question rather disconcerted the elder lady; for her articles of faith were, in truth, exceedingly few and vague: before she could collect herself to reply, Marion had flitted on her wilful way.

But with the other monitress it fared very differently. There had never been much love between the sisters-in-law. Lady Rainscliffe was a thorough Charteris—staid, solemn, and intensely respectable; her temper, that had never been serene, was embittered by protracted ill-health. She had disapproved of her brother's marriage from the first, and had not scrupled to express her opinions openly; neither—upon the rare occasions of their meeting—had she shown any disposition to conciliate the fair stranger. It must be owned that the tone of her remonstrance, now, was rather judicial and menacing; and too full of allusions to 'peril of family honour.'

Marion stood and listened, with half-averted head—so patiently,

that the other began to be proud of the unwholesome terror inspired by the elaborated oration: but, as the last syllable was spoken, she turned and looked Lady Rainscliffe full in the face—the pupils of her deep-grey eyes darkening, as was their wont when she was bitterly angered.

“Did my husband leave you any commission to watch or to school me?” she asked, with an ominous calmness.

The other was so surprised at overt defiance where she had expected submission, that she could hardly put into words an indignant disclaimer.

“I am glad of it”—Marion went on, just as quietly. “Glad for John’s sake, as well as my own. We have never had an angry word since we were married. Perhaps you did not know that? We have seen you so seldom at Charteris Royal.” (She smiled, as her antagonist winced under the stab. Her brother’s fancied estrangement, which she always imputed to Marion, was one of Lady Rainscliffe’s heaviest crosses.) “So, I understand, you have spoken entirely on your own authority? I shall not stoop to defend myself, or deny anything. I dare say the ‘family honour’ is just as dear to me as it is to you. I have my children to consider, as well as myself, you know.” (Stab the second: the other’s marriage-bed was barren.) “But, if you think it is not safe in my hands, you had better write to John and tell him so. I won’t bear malice for what you have said, now; I suppose you spoke according to your own ideas of duty. But I cannot thank you: if you had meant kindly, you would have spoken in another tone. I will never listen to another word on this subject: it will be best that we should both forget it has been opened at all.”

As Marion swept from the room—with head erect and neck wreathed superbly, like a queen declining to plead before a vulgar tribunal—astonishment, rather than wrath, kept the other silent. Could that haughty woman—with her imperial defiance and disdain—ever have been the wild Irish girl whom she had looked down upon for years with a contemptuous dislike, as a pretty wayward poppet at the best?

Strict and austere, and oftentimes uncharitable, Lady Rainscliffe was not vindictive. Conviction somehow crept over her

that, through all her reckless coquetry, Marion was clear of guilt either in fact or intention: having once realized this, she abandoned all idea of writing to her brother. She knew what incurable misery has often been wrought by such tale-bearing—there are trees that wither away utterly if their bark be once rudely rent away; and Lady Rainscliffe was too just, if not too generous, to incur such fearful risk to avenge her own affronted pride. There never could be cordiality betwixt them; but it is doubtful if she did not like her sister-in-law better than before, when the first burst of her temper had passed.

Cannot you fancy the capital that a finished coquette would make out of these two passages-of-arms, when narrating them to her supposed fellow-culprit? Some of these ingenious young females have a knack of amplifying the proportions and disguising the substance of a simple offering of millet and honey, till there seems to issue therefrom the unctuous reek of a hecatomb.

It is so pleasant to be able to say to a servitor on the point of 'striking' for higher wages—

"See what I have undergone—for you."

Uttered low and plaintively, and aided by a judicious amount of eye-play, this talisman will rarely fail in bringing back rebellious spirits to their allegiance.

Mrs Charteris had other sops, too, at hand, wherewith to pacify her Azor, when he grew fractious and growled over-loud. Like all other men of his stamp, Flemyng was much given to small causeless jealousies.

Marion knew right well how to turn this weakness to account. She would get up a mild by-flirtation; and carry it on till Vincent began to sulk, and finally to upbraid. Then would ensue a scene of charming penitence and mock submission; and the offender—

Folding her white hands so meekly—

would accept fair terms of truce; the prime condition being, of course, the dismissal of the obnoxious intruder.

Altogether, it was very 'pretty fooling.' Nevertheless, before Easter was past, the lady had grown somewhat weary of her pastime, and of her playmate—if the truth must be told. She was not really sorry when her husband came to fetch her home;

not sorry either that John hurried her away in such haste (a pet Bill of the Chalkshire landowners was on, immediately after the recess) that the bustle of packing-up scarcely left space for one brief leave-taking.

So, all might have ended harmlessly, and the beleaguered garrison might have marched out with all the honours of such unholy warfare, leaving no tell-tale trophy in the hands of the assailant. But Mrs Charteris was too thorough a woman to leave well alone.

Several of her intimates came down to the Piazza de' Termini to wish her a last good-speed: amongst these was Vincent Flemyng. Marion was fairly frightened by his white haggard face, and wild hopeless eyes. They haunted her on her journey—there was no chance for one word of private farewell—till, for the first time in her life, she grew remorseful.

Pity she could not guess, that her stricken swain had been deep in lansquenet, till day broke, and he dared tempt evil fortune no further. The 'red gold,' whose loss troubled him most, just then, was not, I dare aver, that which shimmered in her glorious tresses; and cheeks are blanched by late hours not less rapidly than by thwarted love.

Such a knowledge would have saved Marion from an unpardonable folly. Acting on her first impulse, she employed her first available moments of solitude in writing to Flemyng.

She had done this before; and divers notelets had fluttered his way, during the Roman philanderings; but there was nothing seriously compromising in any of these: moreover, she relied implicitly on his repeated assurance, that every scrap of her handwriting was burnt as soon as it was read: with all her little wiles and coquettish stratagems, she was herself utterly incapable of a deliberate falsehood; and it was about the last thing she suspected in others.

This letter was very different. It was not exactly criminal, because the writer had no positive guilt to confess or imply; but many a sinner, to whom marriage-vows are a mockery, would have expressed herself less rashly and unguardedly: it was such a letter as few wives would see in their husbands' hands without feeling faint with fear and shame—such as few mothers would hear

read in their children's ears, without a wish that the earth would open to swallow up them and their dishonour.

A score of times, at least, during the week after that precious epistle had been posted, did poor Marion wish it recalled. She wished it—having perfect trust in the faith and discretion of the man to whom it was addressed. The punishment would almost have equalled the offence, if she could have seen the crafty satisfaction succeed the first look of surprise on Vincent Flemmyng's face, as he read every line twice carefully over; and then locked up the letter in the inmost recess of a despatch-box, that held other ensamples of the same handwriting; muttering half aloud—

“I must win, the next time we play. She'll never trump *that* card.”

With all these Platonic diversions and distractions, it is easy to conceive how Vincent's studies must have languished. To any conversant with such matters, it will be needless to say that the fair Cause herself was first and foremost in upbraiding the truant.

“I positively will not have you come out to-morrow, till you have done such and such an amount of work.”

Ah, comrade of mine! Have not we, in our time, heard words like these? And do we not know, pretty well, what such prohibitions are worth?

Overnight, we bow the head, and murmur submission. But the morrow breaks bright and breezy; the very day for making mirth, or making hay, or making—never mind what else. Flesh is frail; too frail for self-sacrifice, just now. We will work double-tides, when skies begin to lower; let us take our pleasure a-field, whilst they are cloudless. ‘Art is long; Life is short’—quotha? Then Art can the better afford to wait. So

Black Bayard from the stable bring;

The rain is o'er, the winds are down.

No other, this blithe morning, shall ride at our bonnibell's bridle-rein.

When we came into the presence of our mistress and monitress, were her brows bent very menacingly? I trow not. Just a semblance of surprise, perhaps—or a shake of the head, more saucy than reproachful—then came the sweetest smile, that condoned the offence, and gave absolution in full.

All through those weeks of idlesse, Flemyng had nourished vague resolutions of buckling to work in earnest, so soon as Mrs Charteris should have departed. When this happened, he did make some such effort. But the mind, no more than the body, is to be relied on, when it is once thoroughly unstrung; there is a time when energetic action ceases to be a matter of will.

You remember the favourite theme of Scandinavian legends: how the valiant Sea-King went on from conquest to conquest, making sport of toil and peril in the hardihood of his might; till he fell under the spell of some lovely witch-lady; in whose lap he lay, till his stark sinewy limbs grew round and enervate, and his brown brawny hands soft and womanly white: how, when the charm was broken at the last, he donned his rusted armour, and went forth to do battle as of afore-time; but, finding that his strength had become as nought, came to a shameful end. Such stories repeat themselves, infinitely often, in every century of the world's history; rarely, even in a cycle of ages, does the prowess of Sardanapalus startle friends and foes.

The parallel holds terribly true with those whose life-battle has to be fought out with dexterity of hand or brain; and so Vincent Flemyng found it.

It is not likely, that, even with steady labour, he would ever have achieved any great eminence as a painter. There was a weak washy 'prettiness' about his best efforts, more discouraging to his master than crudeness of conception or coarseness of colouring. There was no *substance* to improve; a fatal—'thus far and no farther'—stamp was set upon each and every one of Vincent's most ambitious tentatives. If he was no favourite with his fellow-students, it is certain that no professional envy lay at the bottom of his unpopularity.

Unpopular he unquestionably was. He did not over-awe his associates in the least; or even impress them, as he supposed, with his social superiority; the honest fellows were simply bored by his mannerisms and affectations. Most of them had been brought into contact—more or less familiar—with Britons of infinitely higher rank than Flemyng could pretend to; they had no democratic prejudices against the "Swell" *pur et simple*. A man was just as welcome at their club coming thither in his

evening armour, straight from the saloons of the *Doria*, as if the dust of a grimy studio lingered on his raiment and unwashed hands. It was merely a question of doffing the 'white-choker'—metaphorically if not literally—and making oneself at home. But, to neither the one nor the other of these things could Flemyng condescend. Naturally enough, the circle of his intimates narrowed daily: he wearied the patience even of those who would have petted a quarrelsome cur that had been owned by Vesey Ferrars: as the spring advanced, the only familiars that were left him, were certain members of the English Club, the connecting link being a common devotion to high play.

Vincent began to feel much the same disgust for Rome as he had done for Oxford after his discomfiture in the schools; but, for many reasons, it did not suit him to return to England just yet. He would have been half ashamed to confess that he had given up his new profession on such brief trial; besides this, there were certain creditors at home, whom he did not wish to face till his finances were more flourishing.

He wandered about Lombardy and Piedmont, in a desultory purposeless fashion, through the summer; sketching a little now and then, but not pretending to do any earnest work. He would attach himself, for a day or two, to any party of his acquaintance that he chanced to meet, and quit them just as capriciously. During this time, he wrote not unfrequently to Mrs Charteris, and she was weak enough to reply regularly; though she never again committed herself, as she had done in that one unhappy letter. But he had become so remiss in his communication with Warleigh, that even Kate grew weary of the one-sided correspondence; and Mrs Flemyng found it hard to excuse her boy even to herself. In the beginning of autumn, Vincent came across a college-friend who was preparing for a start up the Nile: very little persuasion was needed to induce him to join the party.

That languid mock-travel was exactly suited to his character; he was made to lie under an awning, and quote scraps of dead languages, between puffs of cigarette-smoke, till the pleasure-trip seemed to assume a certain business-like form, and the least crudite of his companions felt like a scientific explorer.

There let him bide, for awhile. Not often again, while his

life shall last, will Vincent Flemyng float on smooth, silent waters.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SHALL OLD ACQUAINTANCE BE FORGOT ?

MRS MASKELYNE'S was a very quiet funeral. It must needs have been so under the circumstances, even if the poor lady's wishes to that effect had not been clearly set down in her brief testament. Amongst the few intimate friends and old retainers who saw her laid by her husband's side, was Seyton of Warleigh. He was standing by the open vault, when the rites were done—half uncertain as to whether he should address Maskelyne or no—when the latter touched his arm. The two had not exchanged a word since that night when Brian was left alone with his dead; for Seyton had joined the simple foot-procession at the hall-door of Mote, without crossing the threshold.

"I want to speak to you," Brian whispered. "Will you come to the library? Mr Nesbitt will be there too." The last-named was the rector of the parish, who had just performed the ceremony.

"I will wait for him," Tom answered; and, when the clergyman was ready, the two walked slowly together across the park, following Brian very closely. They were half-way to the house before either spoke. Then Seyton broke the silence abruptly.

"You can guess what he wants us for? It is to speak about his wife. Do you know if she is here?"

"I know that she is not," the other said. "I learnt so much last night accidentally. It is a terrible business altogether. I wish I saw my way clearly in it, or rather through it. It will be so very awkward for us when she does come."

It was a cold raw gusty morning, yet the divine looked un-

comfortably warm just then. He was a pious, hard-working man, and nervously anxious to leave no duty undone; but sadly deficient in moral courage and worldly wisdom. He owed everything that he possessed to the Maskelynes: perhaps it was no wonder if the prospect of a conflict betwixt gratitude and the obligations of his office fairly appalled him. But Tom Seyton had very little sympathy with trepidations such as these.

"I don't understand you," he said, rather sternly. "Why should there be any doubt or difficulty? If the marriage was properly solemnized, at the proper time, and no previous lightness of life can be proved against Mrs—Mrs Maskelyne" (the word seemed to choke him), "there can be no possible reason why my wife, or yours, should not call on her. If it be otherwise, Brian would not venture to present her to either. As to intimacy—you'll use your own discretion, I suppose; as I shall mine."

Though the good parson was somewhat abashed, for the moment, he was certainly comforted by this decisive view of the case. Neither spoke another word till they entered the library together.

Brian Maskelyne was sitting at a table strewn with papers and open letters, leaning his brow on his hand. He lifted up his face as they came in—such a wan, weary face—greeting them mutely; then his head dropped again; and so he sate for a minute or more. When he began to speak, his eyes were still shaded.

"You may think me unfeeling and unnatural, perhaps, in troubling you with my own affairs at such a moment. I cannot help that. I do so because I hold it to be my simple duty. For the wrong I did my dead mother God will judge me—if He has not done so already. I cannot atone for this by failing in other duties. I know right well what difficulties are in store for me and mine. It is just for this reason that I have called in here to-day my parish-priest, and the friend whom my father trusted in not less than I do. It is about my wife, of course, that I would speak. Will you look at these papers?"

It was strange to hear that dull monotonous voice and

formal utterance issuing from lips scarcely darkened with down; the terrible incongruity struck both the hearers, as they took the proffered documents, and perused them silently.

They were only two; and simple enough. The first was a marriage-certificate, regularly signed and fully attested; the ceremony having been performed at a suburban church, immediately on Brian's attaining his majority. The other was the affidavit of Anna Maria Standen, spinster; stating that her niece had resided under her roof and sole charge, from the day of her flight from Torrcaster to the eve of the wedding—inclusive.

"The proofs are not full enough, I daresay," Brian went on, after a pause. "At least, the world might easily find a flaw in them. But they are all I can give. Will they not be sufficient for you? See now—I speak not only as before God, but before my dead mother; for her coffin is not covered yet—I believe my wife to be as pure as she was when by my father at the altar. Seyton—Tom Seyton—you've known me from my cradle: *you* don't think I am lying?"

His tones rang out boldly—almost wildly—now; and, as he rose to his feet, with flushing cheeks and sparkling eyes, there shone out on his face an honest chivalry, not unworthy of the race who—with all their faults and follies—had seldom thoroughly belied their motto—'Do or Die.'

Tom Seyton rose too, quickly; and his hand met Brian's half-way.

"Of course I believe you. I couldn't help it, if I would. And Nesbitt is satisfied too, I know. My wife shall call here, as soon as your doors are open again. That is all I can promise, at present. But, Brian—I want three words with you, alone, before I go."

The minister, albeit not over-sagacious on such points, had the tact to perceive that the grand principle of—'least said, &c.'—was especially applicable here. It is not necessary to record the set formalities with which he proceeded to indorse the opinions of the previous speaker; after which—and certain ceremonial condolences—he took his departure with a mind agreeably lightened of its load.

Not till the door was fairly closed did either of the other men open his lips. Then Maskelyne spoke.

"Let me say one word first. She has written her pardon here"—he touched a letter lying before him—"but I hanker to *hear* the words, 'I forgive.' I think I might sleep if I heard you say them once. She trusted you so fully; and you were with her so nearly to the end, that you might almost speak for her. Won't you try and say those words? Perhaps it is a sick man's fancy; for I feel strangely ill."

"I do forgive heartily," Seyton answered; "at least, I would if you had done me the faintest wrong; and that your poor mother did so, no one knows better than I; though Kate gave you her very last message. You must not give way to sick fancies either: you must be man enough to bear great sorrow—ay, and great remorse—as you would bear sharp bodily pain. Besides, you have hard work before you—in many ways—for many a day to come. It seems cruel to speak as I must speak now; but it would be worse cruelty to leave misunderstanding behind me. You said just now—'I had known you from your cradle;' that is why I use language as plain as I should to my own child, if he were of your age and stood where you stand. Come what may, *you* will always be welcome at Warleigh; and, if you are in any real need of me, you may reckon on me, while I live, either here or elsewhere. And we shall always meet on the old terms, on any neutral ground. But for your wife—it is different." His face darkened visibly—"She shall have Kate's countenance and mine—if she thinks it worth having—thus far. No one shall speak of her before me otherwise than is fitting of the woman whom you married fairly and honourably—though in secret. And Kate shall call here, formally, at regular intervals, if you both wish it. But closer intimacy there never can be. I wish—from my heart I wish—that, out of the old friends of your family, we were likely to stand aloof—alone."

Brian looked up at the speaker, rather piteously than angrily.

"Do you mean that I am likely to lose them all?"

There was a full minute's pause; then the low steady answer came.

"Such as come often here will have loved your mother—less than I did."

I have said before that some of Tom Seyton's abrupt home-truths were apt to cut deeper than if they had been aimed in malice: so it was now. At the last word Brian Maskelyne sank backward into the chair behind him, burying his face in his hands once more with a scarcely repressed groan. When he looked up, his long black eye-lashes were wet. God help him! With guilt and troubles and responsibilities enough on his shoulders to crush a strong wise man, he was but a boy in many ways, after all.

"There never can be strife between us; I know that much," he said. "See—even now, I can thank you for what you have done; ay, and for what you have promised to do. But I can't speak of these things any more, to-day. Perhaps I shall be better when I'm alone. Won't you come over and help me through this business that makes my head whirl, to-morrow or next day? I shall be quite alone till I go up to town."

Tom assented readily; and soon after went his way. He spent most of the two following days at Mote. During that time not a word was interchanged on any save business topics. But as Seyton stood on the hall-steps bidding Brian good-bye, the other detained his hand, whilst he spoke slowly and reluctantly, as though urged on by some inward prompting, that he would fain have repressed.

"One word before I go. I didn't like your look when you first mentioned my wife. You know nothing against her, surely? It must have been only my fancy. Tell me it was so: tell me that I am safe—quite safe—in trusting her. By G—d, I should go mad if I did not feel sure that all her heart and love is mine, after what she has cost me."

Seyton shook himself clear of the earnest grasp, with a kind of abrupt energy.

"What puts such ideas into your brain?" he said almost roughly. "It will soon wear itself out, at this rate. I know—absolutely nothing. Will that satisfy you? Now, good-bye. You're almost late as it is."

As he watched Brian drive away, Seyton felt something like

the self-reproach of an honest man, who—for good and sufficient reasons—has withheld part of the truth that he might have told. He *knew* nothing, certainly; yet vague rumours—the first faint smoke-wreaths from a smouldering fire—had reached him, not over-favourable to the fair fame of the beautiful bride; his own inward convictions—prejudices, if you will—spoke still more plainly. Not to mince matters—Tom felt assured that though she might succeed in hoodwinking the world and her husband to her life's end, Bessie Maskelyne was little better than the worst of her sex at heart.

Most people, I think, would allow that he was justified in holding his peace. It would sadly disturb the equilibrium of society, if such candid opinions were often laid upon the altar even of hereditary friendship.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT HOME.

WE need not linger over the triumphs of the Standen party when they knew that the grand prize was fairly within their grasp without let, hindrance, or deduction. There may be something picturesque in the swoop of the *rapacidæ*; they are but a sorry sight as they sit flapping their pinions over the quarry before the battening begins.

It is hardly fair, though, to apply this simile to Bessie Maskelyne at Mote. It would have been well if all her impulses had been as blameless and natural as that which caused her pulse to bound exultingly, as she roved through the long gilded galleries and gorgeous saloons of her new home; finding it deliciously difficult to realize the truth that she was absolute mistress of all. Of all—with a very trifling exception. Of the rooms that had been specially his mother's, Brian kept the keys, and no one but himself was allowed to cross their thresholds. Bessie troubled

herself very little about this whim; indeed—so far as her husband was concerned—she was not likely to be jealous either of the living or the dead.

For some time the two were entirely alone at Mote. As the excitement and novelty wore off the lady's restless spirit began to chafe under the splendid monotony that she had once thought so enviable; and she became subject to occasional fits of rather decided petulance. Brian was everything that was kind, certainly; he seemed fonder of her every day, and was always ready to attend her whithersoever she fancied to wander, on foot, in carriage, or in saddle. But he had by no means shaken off what Bessie—more forcibly than elegantly—called "the mopes." It provoked her sometimes to see how listlessly—almost despondingly indeed—he would shake his head when she ventured on any speculation, as to "when people would begin to call," &c.; the best interpretation to be put upon his manner was, that he thought it too soon to speak of such things as yet.

Before the days of mourning expired, Marlshire had had ample leisure to discuss the terms on which the new dynasty at Mote ought to be received.

It was rather a puzzling question to most people. There was no solid reason for keeping Mrs Maskelyne without the pale. Both the squire of Warleigh and the rector of Motesbury were in a position to affirm that the marriage had been perfectly regular, albeit clandestine—the inducement to secrecy being palpable—and that there were not the faintest grounds for imputation of ante-nuptial frailty. The lady's parentage was objectionable, of course, but not a whit more so than that of several dames who had gradually made their way into the inner circle of Marlshire society, after hovering awhile on its verge. Besides all this, it was notorious that poor Emily Maskelyne had—however reluctantly—ratified Brian's choice before she died. This last point, Bessie's advocates made their battle-horse, and they rode it to the front upon every possible occasion.

But the other side argued that a consent, extorted as it were *in articulo mortis*, was invalid in Social Law. Moreover, they pointed the finger of scorn at the testimony of Anna Maria Standen, spinster; alleging that such a witness was wholly

undeserving of credit; so that an awkward interval, really, remained to be accounted for. With these stern casuists Brian's own assertions went for nothing; for, said they, a husband's evidence, in such a case, is no more to be received than a wife's in an ordinary Criminal Court. The gist of the whole argument came to this—that Jem Standen's daughter was not entitled to the benefit of a doubt.

The disputants soon ranged themselves formally into bands.

Lady Peverell—finding that, by a rare chance, the feeling of the county was likely to be with her, when she wished to make herself disagreeable—set her austere face against Mote, like a very flint-stone; and took her stand upon the bold ground of—‘cut, without compromise.’

As a matter of course, La Reine Gaillarde headed the opposite faction. The instant she heard what line her ancient antagonist had adopted, she announced her own intentions of calling on the bride, as soon as the decencies of mourning would allow; and of ‘taking her up, if she turned out well.’ On which, the elder dame retorted—letting off the steam of a virtuous high-pressure with a snort, wrathful and resonant—‘That she had long ceased to be surprised at anything Lady Laura Brancepeth might say or do.’

And so matters remained for awhile.

Both parties were naturally anxious to enlist the Seytons on their side; or, at the least, to have the advantage of their opinion. But Seyton utterly declined to enter into the merits of the case; merely saying that ‘they should call, of course;’ and Kate, even with her intimates, only committed herself to the avowal that ‘she should do exactly as Tom told her.’ The subject was so evidently painful to both of them, that the most inveterate busy-body shrank from pressing it.

The *châtelaine* of Brancepeth kept her word: her ponies came spinning up the elm-avenue, two days after it became known that the doors of Mote were open to the world again. Truth to say—she was rather disappointed with her visit.

All her courage and self-possession—she had plenty of both—could not enable Mrs Maskelyne to appear in her right place, whilst she did the honours of her new home. She might have

fared better, perhaps, with Brian by her side; but he chanced to be out; so she had to bear the brunt of the interview as best she might. She was clever enough to know that she was not playing her part well; and this provoked her intensely; for she would have given a year of life to have sent that especial visitor away with a favourable impression: the effort to seem at her ease made her manner bold, almost defiant. No wonder that the other, who—with all her reckless independence—was *grande dame* to the tip of her dainty finger, felt the conviction grow every instant stronger that there never could be any sympathy betwixt herself and the superb *roturière*.

"It's a great pity, my dear," she said,—making her moan to a confidante. "I wanted so much to take her up, if it was only to vex Grimalkin." (So, she feared not to speak of the august Peverell.) "But it won't do. She'll never suit us: I can see that. Somehow—I don't think she's honest; and there's a perpetual self-assertion about her that no nerves can stand."

Neither was Bessie's first interview with Mrs Seyton much more successful; though, here, the fault was not all on her side. Indeed, an old friend might have been puzzled to recognise merry, frank-spoken Kate in that sedate personage, dropping one decorous common-place after another, like one who repeats a set wearisome lesson. Perhaps Mrs Maskelyne was not wholly unjustified in afterwards characterizing her visitor, in her own forcible language, as "stiff and frumpish."

On this occasion Brian was present. But he was too nervous to be of much use in making things go off more smoothly and pleasantly.

Much more bitterly would Bessie Maskelyne have chafed if she could have guessed at the struggle and constraint with which Kate Seyton forced herself to sit out her appointed half-hour. Something near akin to loathing sprang up in her gentle nature as she looked on the usurper, enthroned—audacious, triumphant—in the seat of her who had sunk so lately under shame and sorrow. The very mourning, that could not tone down the splendour of Bessie's gorgeous beauty, seemed a mockery and insult. With the gleaming blue eyes before her,

and the clear ringing voice—not always subdued enough—in her ears, Kate's thoughts went back to a sweet pale face that once lay so close to her own, whilst the weak lips whispered—

“ Kiss my own boy—for me—my poor boy.”

With all this in her mind, and more, she would have been no true woman had she forced herself to be cordial. It was no wonder that these two should have parted, for the first time, in mutual distrust and dislike.

Mrs Maskelyne, it must be confessed, was not always so unlucky. As she grew more settled in her fresh dignity, much of the awkwardness above alluded to passed off, and certain asperities of manner were quite smoothed away. Some of her visitors—especially of the male sex—were too dazzled by her personal attractions to be very critical; they thought how superb she would look, presiding at one of the great entertainments for which Mote used once to be famous, but which had been much less frequent of late years: seen at the end of a pleasant festive vista, Bessie Maskelyne, to such eyes, appeared well nigh faultless.

But none of these last-named adherents were of importance enough to turn the scale of the county's verdict. It must be owned that this was unfavourable by a considerable majority of votes: indeed, after being as it were set, for some months, on her trial, neutrality was about all that Brian's wife could fairly reckon upon.

He did not try to delude himself, either as to her position or his own: truly, hardly a day passed without giving him reason to remember certain words spoken by Tom Seyton on the morning of the funeral. Few, indeed, of the old friends of the family crossed the threshold of Mote after the first formal call; moreover, when he met such accidentally, he fancied—it could scarcely be fancy—that there was on their faces a cold reserve, or, sometimes, a pity yet harder to bear.

Realizing all this—did he once repent his marriage, or begrudge its cost? Not once, I dare aver. Though remorse for the sorrow he had brought on his dead mother haunted him still, like a ghost, he bore his burden alone; and never thought of making Bessie an accomplice in that mortal sin. Nay, each visible sign of the

world's avoidance drew him closer to his fair wife's side; till even her hard hollow nature began to be touched by the delicate tenderness that never slept or slackened.

Before very long, Mr Standen put in an appearance at Mote—invited specially by Brian; for Bessie never troubled herself to make a suggestion on the subject.

However jubilant he might have felt at heart, he made his entry by no means with flaunt of colours or beat of drum. That same *relligio loci*, which overcame him on his first visit, possessed him again directly he had passed the ponderous portals. Every one knows the faint, antique, half-aromatic fragrance which pervades old halls hung with mouldering trophies of chase or war. To most nostrils it comes gratefully enough; but it weighed down Mr Standen's lungs like the fumes of strong incense.

He responded to his son-in-law's greeting with much deference and ceremony. The lord of Mote and its broad acres was a very different personage from the penniless refugee, over whose head hung the sword of disinheritance.

"If you'll put me in some out-of-the-way corner, I shan't trouble you much," he said, meekly. But he was hugely delighted when he was shown the apartments prepared for him.

They were three pleasant rooms enough, in a remote wing, looking on the one side over the park, on the other into the stable-quadrangle. Bessie had selected them herself; and she deigned to express a hope that her parent would 'make himself at home' there. He did so, thoroughly, after a while; but, for all practical purposes, he might as well have been located a league away from the house. He soon found out that 'late hours didn't always suit him;' and petitioned to be allowed to dine, occasionally, in his own rooms and at his own time. The fact was, that he could neither eat nor drink in comfort in the presence of the Butler—an elder of venerable presence, who was in the habit of 'fixing' Mr Standen with solemn questioning eyes. He preferred being ministered unto by one of the under-footmen, set specially apart for that service, with whom he could prattle affably during meals; pleasing himself the while with the idea that he was 'condescending.'

Ere long he was on terms of confidential familiarity with the

head-coachman, who—albeit intensely respectable—had for many years made the Racing Calendar his favourite study. It was quite a sight to see those two conning over the handicaps, and ‘spotting’ probable ‘good things’—grave and authoritative, as Cabinet Councillors.

Jem Standen rarely ventured to race-meetings now; and did all his betting by commission. He had grown much shakier of late; and the roaring turmoil of the Ring bewildered him, though he was familiar with its every sound. Indeed, the poor old Silenus was rapidly becoming incapable of harming any one—but himself. He still drank hard of nights; but, as it was always in solitude, none, but the purveyor of his liquor, knew *how* hard. He would creep out, on sunny afternoons, on the back of a sober hack, and dawdle about the woodland rides; rarely going beyond the demesne-walls; halting whenever he came to a good point of view, to mutter to himself—with a weak vacuous chuckle—

“All Bessie’s—every stick and stone of ’em—Bessie’s.”

But he was happy enough—happier than he had ever been in his disreputable life—and, perhaps, quite as inoffensive as any crapulous eremite of ancient time.

Twice or thrice Maskelyne was compelled to go to town on business; and Bessie bore him company. On each of these occasions Kit Daventry called on them; beyond these formalities, no intercourse was kept up with him—so far as Brian knew. He did not think it necessary to honour all his wife’s relations; and the Lawyer was not pressed to pay an early visit.

Indeed, a year and more passed away before that dark handsome face showed itself at Mote.

CHAPTER XX.

NEVE TU SPERNE CHOREAS.

A LONG vaulted hall, over-narrow for fair proportion, and made narrower still by the side-rows of quaint old pillars supporting the dusky roof; somewhat clumsily, though gaudily, decorated; and very tryingly lighted with a line of tiny gas-jets running round the cornice and a huge centre chandelier; the floor far from unexceptionable; for no amount of hard rubbing can efface the dents of nailed shoon left from the last farmers'-meeting held in the Town Hall of Torrcaster.

There is a provincial air about the whole presence-chamber, which surely does not extend to the company there assembled. For, at certain seasons, the great families of two counties emulate each other in striving to fill it becomingly; and over the uneven flooring glide, as lightly as they may, many feet familiar with Palace *parquets*. The good folk in those parts are very proud of these gatherings; and distance and weather on such occasions become as things of nought. Delicate dames who, in the midst of the season, are apt to wax plaintive over the necessity of attending some entertainment in the south-western precincts of Belgravia, will gather their party together quite cheerfully for a ten-mile drive through the cold, when the object is one of the Torrcaster balls. They are pleasant enough, too, to tempt many strangers to repeat their visit as often as they can get the chance; so that not a few of such faces are as well known in the Town Hall as those of the native gentles.

It is about the noon of night; and people are settling to their work, or play, in earnest. The best men have got through nearly all their duty-dances by this time, and have leisure to think of their private and selfish interests. Divers tablets are crowded already with those mysterious hieroglyphics that leave so much room for feminine diplomacy; for sometimes they seem like the Median code—at others, as if written on flowing water.

Several of our acquaintances are to the fore, you see. You have time for a long glance round before the next waltz begins.

There is Blanche Ellerslie in her favourite corner, somewhat in the shadow of the pillar ; though a gleam of light falls athwart one side of the demure, dainty head bent down, just now, in pensive languor. She has made good use of her time already, and wild work with the heart of the stalwart cavalier who stands by her side, speaking at intervals in brief energetic whispers ; never relaxing the while the voracious gaze of his fierce, glittering eyes.

Vereker Vane has commanded these five years past that famous light cavalry corps—The Princess's Own Prancers. He is one of the best tacticians in the service, though very young for his grade ; and has invented several new manœuvres, so extraordinarily difficult, not to say dangerous, of execution, that a certain Prussian General was moved almost to tears of envy when they were gone through for his especial benefit. Vane is a bitter martinet on parade, but the cheeriest of all convivialists in the mess-room, and elsewhere ; indeed, some anxious mothers of cornets have said that it would be well if the Colonel did not promote revelry quite so much, both by precept and example. For some of the boys are rather a sorry sight of a morning ; while the effects of late hours and deep drinking are thrown off from his cast-steel constitution like rain-drops from a covering of water-proof.

Yet it is easy to see that Vereker Vane has lived all the days of his life ; his handsome face is neither haggard nor drawn, but the hard battered look about it tells its own tale. He is apt to be somewhat abrupt and overbearing, even in the making of love ; indeed the gallant's amours have hitherto been mostly of a facile, not to say venal description. The fortresses he would have stormed opened their gates before the first trumpet had done sounding ; and the fruit that he plucked would have been over-ripe for most tastes.

After this brief sketch, you will guess, perhaps, what chance the poor *Sabreur* will have in the white, lissom hands of Blanche Ellerslie

Standing somewhat aloof, and watching the proceedings of his superior with amused appreciation on his broad comical face, is another ornament of the same corps ; known all over England

as "Daddy Goring." He got that sobriquet—no man knows how or why—within a week after he joined, and it has stuck to him ever since. There is nothing truculent, or even martial, about his appearance. Round and rubicund as a full-blown abbot, he was born for one especial office—that of a Master of Revels. Of a truth, he radiates conviviality wheresoever he goes; at any symposium he seems out of place elsewhere than in the presidential chair; strangers have been known to come into his presence morose and morbid, and to depart more than decently merry, exhilarated not by strong liquor, but solely by the jovial contagion. No amount of ill-luck, or contrariety of circumstances, has ever been able seriously to disturb his glorious self-complacency, or to abate the flow of a rich Rabelaisian humour; he laughs at love, as at all other earthly troubles; and the women like him never a whit the worse.

Daddy Goring is a favoured guest in all manner of mansions; and can accommodate himself to his society with marvellous facility and unerring tact. Perhaps he himself prefers the free-and-easy style; but his 'company-manners' fit him like a glove; and he seems not less at his ease whilst singing a second to Violet Pendragon, than when his deep sonorous voice trolls out one of those equivocal ditties that solace the small hours of our militant youth. It is an acolastic sort of life, to be sure; but were anything to befall that stout bacchanalian, a wider social blank would ensue than would be left by many sour-visaged Solomons.

Others too are watching the pair; amongst them Lady Laura Brancepeth, who is somewhat aggrieved by their proceedings. Vereker Vane is just the sort of cavalier that she likes to enrol in her own body-guard, the standard of which is somewhat higher than that of the Household Cavalry; for La Reine Gaillarde—herself of superb stature—will abide no dwarfish courtiers. So, with no serious designs on his peace of mind, she chafes none the less at seeing him entirely engrossed by the dangerous widow. One of her intimates, reading her feelings aright, whispers with provocative intent,—

"*La belle* Blanche is playing her little game again, I perceive. How quiet she is over it, too!"

To which the Lady Laura responds—biting her scarlet lips angrily—that—

“Still waters never run straight.”

She has a terrible knack at *travestie* of proverbs, and has occasionally scandalized society not a little by her misquotations ; though no one can help laughing at them. Such as overhear, laugh now, of course ; and the culprit herself joins in it quite heartily : her short-lived vexation has almost vanished before ten bars of her favourite waltz have been played. She will be worth looking at, a few seconds later, when she swirls past Lady Peverell—going best pace with a partner willing and able to breathe her—yet not so fast but that she finds time to flash back over her shoulder a merry defiance, in answer to the other's scowl.

Chalkshire is almost as effectively represented on these occasions as Marlshire itself : from the first-named county several large parties have come in ; the largest of all from Charteris Royal. Marion is in brilliant beauty to-night ; but she does not seem in her wonted high spirits ; a nervous worried look creeps out on her face at times, and a certain abruptness of gesture betrays some inward annoyance or care. This is observable even whilst she is conversing most animatedly with the fortunate cavalier, who stands, very evidently, highest in her favour just now—a tall dark man, with hair and beard trimmed after a foreign fashion, and features decidedly attractive in spite of the utter languor that pervades them and broods in the large sleepy eyes.

Lord Ranksborough is rather a remarkable person in his way ; if it were only for the curious contradictions in his temperament. There never was born a lazier or more perfectly imperturbable creature. He had never deigned to seek, seriously, a help meet for him—indeed he was scarcely quoted in the marriage-market now—and was rather too prone to divert his loneliness by other men's fire-sides. Though he had never yet been a partner in any fatal misdemeanour, he had an unhappy talent for compromising the objects of his admiration. But even these flirtations he conducted in a serene impassive fashion ; dropping a low earnest word now and then, with the air of one who lays a priceless pearl at his mistress' feet ; and filling up all blanks and pauses with the eloquence of his practised eyes.

Strangers, looking on Ranksborough for the first time, thought it a jest when they were told that he was one of the very hardest men over a country that ever sat in saddle; and that seldom has fleeter or stauncher stalker dealt death among the deer. It was strange to see how he would pass from a state of complete repose to the extremes of physical exertion; and relapse again, rapidly as an unstrung bow.

It may be that these contrasts in his character invested the man with a certain attraction and interest. For he was very popular in his own set; and womankind seemed to find more fascination in his listless homage than in the assiduous devotion of others. It was evident enough to-night that Marion Charteris was a willing and heedful listener. Yet, as was aforesaid, her glances would wander occasionally—always in the same direction—with the vexed impatient expression of one fretting under the vigilance of a third person's eyes.

If you follow those glances, they will lead you straight to the corner, where, half masqued by a pillar, stands Vincent Flemýng, with jealous wrath written in every line of his lowering brow.

He is a good deal changed since you saw him last,—scarcely for the better. That long Vandyke beard, which he is gnawing so savagely just now, is picturesque certainly; but it does not suit his peculiar style of face; moreover a sullen distrustful look has settled down there, almost more unpleasant than the old superciliousness. It is hard not to believe that the man would be capable of much that was base and bad, if he once got thoroughly vicious.

He has only been back in England about a week; and this is his first meeting with Marion. He had received one brief note, begging him not to call at Charteris Royal—for reasons hereafter to be explained—till after the Torrcaster ball. The explanation had not come yet; for he had barely had the opportunity of a hurried passing greeting as she swept in, in the midst of her party, leaning on Ranksborough's arm; whose support she seemed rather loth to abandon. He might, of course, have joined the group that—constantly changing its atoms—surrounded Marion wherever she chanced to linger; but this did not suit Flemýng's purpose: scattered crumbs of conversation were not likely to satisfy

him, after so long a fast. So he stood aloof, nursing his anger moodily; scarcely deigning to reply to salutation or question; watching ever for such penitential signals as were wont to pacify him, long ago, in Rome. But now the dark grey eyes had no message for him.

About this time, something that he saw—or fancied he saw—overcame the last faint promptings of prudence and patience; he walked with a quick decided step towards the spot where Marion was standing, — still engaged in a virtual *tête-à-tête*, though the throng brushed her ample skirts on passing. There are fair recluses, who can create for themselves, and one other, a convenient solitude in the inmost heart of a crowd.

Now Vincent was guilty of a gross error in generalship, even before entering into action.

O, pretty page, whose dimpled chin
Never hath known the barber's shear;

hearken to the counsel of a senior, tottering on the verge of two-score.

If she in whom you trusted hath shown signs of treachery, or even gone openly over to the enemy's camp, and you think to bring her back *à main armée*, be cunning, I pray you, in choosing the season of your onslaught. If you cannot catch the fair rene-gade walking alone—like Alp on the moon-lit shore—let the attack be made at any other moment rather than when your rival is her only protector, and must, perforce, judge the combat if he do not draw and strike in.

Nor was this Vincent's only mistake. The first words of one who, without sufficient warrant, troubles confidential converse, should, at least, be guardedly courteous and deferential: Flemyng's were neither.

"You can spare me this waltz, I know?"

The faintest note of interrogation would express all the question that was conveyed; indeed, there was a familiar assumption of authority that, under the circumstances, bordered nearly on insolence. Ranksborough's slumbrous eyes opened, broad and black, on the intruder in haughty astonishment; while Marion's cheek flushed, painfully, with vexation and shame. Her lips were sharply compressed for a second or two, as if she had

some difficulty in repressing her first impulse to speak: had she obeyed it, Vincent Flemyng's vanity—tenacious as it was—would hardly have survived the shock. I don't mean that she would have answered the discourteous according to his discourtesy; she could easily have retorted with one of those graceful rapier thrusts that, in all ages, have proved far more deadly than even the slash of two-handed swords.

But, with all her recklessness, poor Marion knew right well—though she knew not all—that it would never do to push matters to extremity just now; it was necessary to temporize, if only to quiet the suspicions that she saw gleaming under Ranksborough's arching brows: she had not been so much interested in any capture for a long time; it would be too hard to lose her hart-royal when he seemed fairly in the toils. If she could command her voice, she could not quite command her Irish eyes: they shot out one natural glance—only one; then the long lashes drooped; and when they rose again the eyes, too, were schooled. But if to the 'white witches' of our day were given Canidia's power of withering with a look, Vincent Flemyng would have felt a curious sensation in the very marrow of his bones. Yet was not her laugh unmusical as she made answer.

"I must spare you one turn for old acquaintance' sake, though I don't mean to dance much to-night; and travellers have privileges, too. But you need not have made so sure of it beforehand. That comes of smoking pipes with pachas, whom 'to hear is to obey.'"

As she laid her hand on Vincent's arm, she turned on Ranksborough the prettiest pleading look: words could not have expressed more plainly.—"I had better humour this fractious child. Be patient: I shall not be very long away."

And Ranksborough—a passed interpreter of such language—bowed his head gently; whilst his lips rather intimated than syllabled,—

"Ne vous gênez pas."

The disgraced favourite was utterly unconscious of that rapid interchange of signals; but his tone was sufficiently sullen as he murmured,—

"I suppose I ought to apologize for taking you out of such

pleasant company, even for a few minutes. It is worth being absent for two years, to come back and find oneself so welcome."

"Nonsense!" she retorted, pettishly "You know very well that there's nothing to apologize for; unless it is for that absurd confidential fashion of addressing me before an utter stranger."

"No stranger to *you*, Madonna, at least. I can guess now why it was better I should keep away from Charteris Royal."

Marion half withdrew her hand from the arm on which it leant—far more lightly than in the olden time.

"You *will* not allow one to be glad you are home again. It is such up-hill work pacifying you suspicious people! My reasons were simple enough. The Cardales were staying with us. You know what a *mauvaise langue* hers is; and she don't like me. She made up a whole book of fables about my goings-on in Rome; and a few of them are not forgotten yet. I really couldn't afford to give her a chance of publishing a second edition. They have gossiped quite enough in these parts as it is.

Flemyng made no answer. They were walking then beyond the line of pillars, and near the lower end of the hall, which was comparatively deserted. Looking up into his face, Marion saw an evil smile dwelling on his lip, that made her feel vaguely uncomfortable.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked, impatiently. "I do wish you would speak out."

"I was thinking," the other said, "how very prudent and provident you had become of late—how much more prudent than when you posted that charming letter from Genoa. I was reading it over only late last night—a sort of sop to stay one's appetite, you know."

A very bold heart—over-bold said her enemies—beat under Marion Charteris' girdle; but it was as though a frozen hand grasped it now; for several seconds she felt faint and breathless.

The dim fear that had haunted her from the very hour when she had began to repent having set her hand to such a record of guilty folly, stood before her now, visible and tangible. There was no dissembling the cruel stubborn fact: she lay at the mercy of one who was not likely to yield an inch of his vantage-ground.

For she read only too rightly the malign meaning of the eyes that belied the assumed carelessness of the speaker's tone. It was a bitter moment for Marion Charteris; bitter enough to have atoned for more than one venial sin. And no darker guilt lay on her conscience; lightly as she seemed to esteem the duties of wife and mother, she had never rendered herself absolutely unworthy of either name; she had given the world a right to speak jestingly of her—no more.

She had no idea how Vincent would use his power: she only knew that he could use it; and the knowledge made her sick at heart. Even her husband's homely figure, that never yet had overawed her fancy, seemed, just now, to assume the austere dignity of judge and avenger; she felt as if she dared not trust herself alone in his presence. She could laugh at these exaggerated terrors in after-days; but while the fit lasted it was not so easy to realize its humorous side.

"You—you told me you burnt every line I wrote," she whispered, as soon as she recovered her breath a little. How could you—"

"*Did* I say so?" the other retorted, with insolent coolness. "We said so many things in those days that we have forgotten since. There's no rule without an exception. I suppose I made one in favour of that letter—and a few more. It is quite a model in its peculiar style, though I daresay you could improve on it now: practice makes perfect, of course. I wonder if others would appreciate it as much as I have done?"

The Irish blood, that never yet counted cost or danger when tyranny was to the fore, surged up in Marion's veins hot and dauntless. She dropped her tormentor's arm, and looked him fairly in the face, without a sign of submission on her own.

"We have had rather too much of this. I had hoped we might meet as old friends should. It seems this is not to be, and I must sue for peace. Will you tell me your terms? I've been utterly foolish, of course; but—what would you have me be? I *did* trust your word, Vincent. You had better speak plainly. Vague threats don't frighten me. Am I to understand—"

"This is not the place to talk about terms," Vincent broke in savagely; speaking always in the same smothered under-tone.

"Only understand that you are dealing with a man now, instead of the boy that you fooled so long. I'm older, at all events, if not wiser or better, than when we parted."

Her eyes rested on his face till, heated as he was by bitter passion, he shivered inwardly under their freezing scorn.

"A man!" she said. "What woman could doubt your manhood, when you give her proofs like these? Do I not treat you with all possible respect? I should hardly say to a boy, 'What is it that you require of your handmaid?' I suppose the first condition is, that you should have the *entrée* to Charteris Royal. You will do us too much honour whenever it shall please you to come there."

A little ironical curtsy gave the last finishing-stroke to the mock humility of the defence. Flemyng was getting very much the worst of the word-play. He felt he must have breathing-space; and this could only be gained by breaking ground. He did so, not ungracefully; indeed, the soft, gradual sadness that overspread his features would have done credit to an abler facial artist.

"At least, do not speak so," he murmured. "I would rather hear you speak angrily, a thousand times. It was my fault for provoking you. I believe I'm half mad to-night. Forget every word I've said yet; and forgive—as you have forgiven before. Can you make no allowances for me—coming back after such an absence, and finding that my place near you is quite filled up? I insist on nothing—far less threaten. Only I should like to come for a little while to Charteris Royal, whenever it suits you perfectly."

Now Marion was not in the least deceived or thrown off her guard by this sudden lowering of her adversary's sword; but her woman's wit told her that it was for her advantage to accept for the moment even that hollow truce; it told her, too, that her best chance of annihilating the proofs of past folly would be found under her own roof. She answered with her old bright mischievous smile,—

"That is better, *beau sire*. It is so stupid for old friends to quarrel. We'll forget and forgive all to-night's hard sayings. Why shouldn't you come to us next Monday? Some bores will

be gone by then ; and several great people are coming. Amongst others—no, I won't tell you. It shall be a pleasant surprise. The Roman memories will all vanish when you've once seen *her*. Don't begin to protest. There's no time just now. You asked me to waltz, you know ; it would be as well to take three turns, if only for the look of the thing. Besides, I'm curious to see if you've lost my step out there in the East. Perhaps the Almèh have taught you better ones."

He laughed low to himself—thinking how his strong will had triumphed. The next second his arm was round her waist ; and they were merged in the throng.

CHAPTER XXI.

A KALEIDOSCOPE.

EVEN in that whirling eddy one or two amusing features might present themselves to disinterested observers, like you and me.

If you want an ensample of the miseries of an ill-assorted match, there is one ready to your hand.

Early in the evening Harry Anstice, a chief-corner-stone of the Marlshire squirearchy—moved thereunto by his evil genius, and by '47 claret—ventured to proffer himself as a partner to Violet Damer, y-clept by her own very fast set "The Firefly." The damsel—knowing nothing further of the aspirant than that he owned many broad acres, and seeing that he was "a marvellous proper man"—inscribed him on her tablets not unwillingly. Now, Violet has an artist's love for waltzing ; and does it, some people say, almost *too* well for a non-professional. Having quite as keen an eye for matrimonial main-chances as her fellows, she would hardly intrust herself to the heir-apparent of a dukedom—a notoriously "bad mover"—without making moan

over the self-sacrifice. Harry Anstice is but a moderate performer, with all the advantages given in, of abundant elbow-room, and an indulgent partner used to his ways. Ever since he made that rash plunge he has been haunted with misgivings, lest—having undertaken a task far beyond his power—he should be brought to open shame. These doubts and fears have waxed stronger as the moment of trial drew nearer; he has been fidgeting about nervously all the evening, too flurried to attempt anything beyond square dances; but, nevertheless, has waxed hot already, more than is becoming.

“I was all in a lather before I got to the starting-post”—poor Harry said, describing his sensations to his chief confidant.

At last his courage is brought to the sticking-point with several agonizing turns of the screw; and, clasping his partner's delicate waist with a convulsive energy, he plunges headlong into the whirl with that blind recklessness which so often accompanies a sinking heart.

Before they have taken five turns the Firefly recognises the appalling fact that her cavalier is steering wild, and has not the faintest power of regulating his own long vacillating steps, much less of guiding hers aright; instead of avoiding collisions by a dexterous side sway, or quick reverse, he blunders on, as if it were the bounden duty of others to clear out of his track—“just like a great White Elephant,”—said the lady afterwards (she had just been reading somebody's Diary in Siam). As a matter of course, both have rather a rough time of it. Now, there is a very dauntless spirit, and tough vitality to boot, within that fragile frame of Violet's; she minds hard knocks in the press of battle as little as any Maid of Orleans or Saragossa; but it is too aggravating to have to go to the ambulance after a simple field-day. where, for all possible evolutions, there is verge to spare. A sharp word is on her lips, when Harry anticipates her, by staggering back into the outer circle—dizzy and breathless. Yes: actually breathless; though he can do his mile in 5·20 any day, and can walk half the keepers in Marshshire to a stand-still. He can scarcely stammer out some vague “hope that she is not tired;” to which the Firefly responds—

"No, not tired ; but—"

Completing the sentence with a quick, upward glance, like a sting, which will rankle long in poor Harry's memory ; warning him, let us hope, against meddling with those bright-eyed little town-mice unadvisedly.

Of a very different stamp is that other couple—floating along, smoothly and lightly, as dancers seen in a dream ; while solid obstacles of flesh and blood seem to melt out of their path, like bodiless shadows. The pretty blonde with the large, brown, plaintive eyes is Minnie Carrington, betrothed a month ago with great parental exultation—herself contentedly acquiescing—to the wealthy rector of Mudiford Magna. Her cavalier you may possibly have heard of before. It is no other than Bertie Grenvil.

Things, amatory and financial, have gone rather hard of late with that graceless Cherub ; and, according to his custom, he has decided on absence from the scene of action, till the different *embroglie* shall have disentangled themselves. He has come down to the country, with "a whole carriage-bagful of good resolutions," as he himself expressed it ; and has taken the pledge of total abstinence, as far as love-making of any sort is concerned, for the entirety of his long leave. Truth to say, the goblet that he has drained so often, and more than once forsworn, seems perilously near his lips just now.

Yes, it is a very sympathetic and confidential performance altogether ; and exceeding pleasant to look upon to disinterested bystanders, such as you and I. Yet it were better, perchance, if that waltz had never been played.

Better, certainly, for the peace of mind of yonder rubicund divine, who watches the couple in evident travail of spirit ; vowing, doubtless, to himself that measures, short, sharp, and decisive, shall soon be taken with these vanities ; and that never again, with his free will, shall his spouse-elect gyrate in the grasp of a godless guardsman ; and waxing even hotter in his distemperature, till at last he feels as truculent as one of the crop-eared chaplains who preached fire and sword against

Better, too, for the *langoureuse* Minnie herself; whose dreams may be haunted, for some time to come, with recollections of soft chestnut hair, almost brushing her own tresses; and of a low musical voice, murmuring those broken sentences that form texts for so many after meditations. I doubt if, during the next week at least, she will hear the heavy step of her plethoric affianced without a guilty shudder of repugnance.

As for that reprobate Cherub—it were folly indeed to waste pity or thought on one who, if ‘scuffling’ be sin, is surely long past praying for.

There, to the right—a little wide of the throng—goes Vereker Vane; you can guess who his partner is, though his tall figure almost masks her just now. The soldier’s face is set, and his eyes are glittering with a sort of fierce eagerness: even so may have looked some tawny-haired rover in the rough old times—carrying off his beautiful prize through shivering lances, or over angry waters; such an one as the hero of that famous song, in which you seem to hear the swirl of waves, and the whistle of rising winds—

Like the swift cormorant,
Who, with broad wings aslant,
Seeketh some rocky haunt,
With his prey laden;
So under mist and rain,
Beating to sea again,
Through the wild hurricane,
Bore I the maiden.

And, in the little quiet face that rests on the stalwart martialist’s shoulder, you will read nothing but the truthfulness of weak womanhood, confiding in her natural protectorate. Yet, I wis it is not hard to discern which is the stronger and governing spirit of the twain. Omphalè was clever enough in her own benighted day, but she might have learned a lesson or two, worth all her simple science,—sitting at the tiny feet of Blanche Ellerslie.

One more *croquis*, for old acquaintance’ sake, before we leave that fair company to their diversions.

Look at Kate Seyton, gliding swiftly and steadily along,

supported by the solid right arm of the Major of the Princess's Own.

Alec Turnbull is rather a character. He is far senior to his chief, both in age and length of service; and, some think, is even better in certain points of drill, though not so brilliant a tactician. The ancient family of which he is a cadet is very poor, and has no interest to spare. So he had to save and wait for many a weary year before he could purchase his troop; and might have waited yet longer for his majority, if a death vacancy had not helped him. Indeed, he could say—like that veteran whose mild little joke answered so well—“It was no wonder if he were somewhat bald, when so many had gone over his head.”

He might have been comparatively affluent, and a field-officer long ago, if he would have exchanged: but the one aim of his life's ambition has been, to command the Princess's Own; and it is rumoured he has laid by enough to attain this, whensoever Vereker shall become weary of soldiering. No earthly thing is so near to the Major's heart as the honour and well-being of that famous corps. He believes as religiously as any other Article of Faith—and he is a sincere, single-hearted Christian—that there never was such a regiment since the days of chivalry—

And never will be, till the world shall end.

In spite of his personal economy, the veriest spendthrift of them all is not more free-handed than he, whenever there is a question of expense that may augment the festive renown of the mess. It is, indeed, mainly owing to him that the Prancers are so marvelously popular. The youngsters are always fond of Old Alec (as they call him, with a kindly irreverence, when his back is turned); and he keeps them up to the social collar admirably, whenever they show signs of shirking. He insists that it is incumbent on soldiers, who have been hospitably received in a county, to reciprocate, by being ever ready to breathe such female relatives of their hosts as may be chorographically inclined. And this maxim he has backed up for many years by example, no less than by precept. Practice has made him perfect to a certain extent; he waltzes with a mechanical precision, just as if he were executing an evolution in the saddle. If not a very

brilliant, he is a very safe, cavalier, and is no more like to bring his partner to grief than to 'club' a squadron in the field.

So Kate is not much to be pitied, after all. This, too, is evidently her husband's opinion, who—leaning against a pillar, near to the top of the hall, discoursing horse-and-hound talk with Frank Braybroke—ceases not to follow her admiringly, with his honest eyes. Every succeeding year Tom reflects, with increasing satisfaction, that his pet "can hold her own with the best of them still."

And there is no lack of competition. For, on these special occasions, it is the want of Marshshire matronhood—still short of life's meridian—to indulge their genius in the dancing line; many that in town and elsewhere never venture on anything beyond a staid quadrille or chastened Lancers, or beam on you from the wall with a steady lustre, flash out, for the nonce—the brightest of revolving lights.

"It's a very full meet to-night," says the Squire, at last. "I make out several new lots, and all the old ones—but one. Doesn't it seem strange—not to see a single representative of Mote? Brian's mourning is well over, surely?"

And Tom Seyton's face darkens as he answers—nearly in the words of that bold lady who bearded the regicides in their den—

"He has more sense than to be here."

More sense: or, perhaps—not enough of courage. For Maske-lyne was becoming a moral coward, as far as his wife was concerned. Nor was this so wonderful. At the few gatherings at which they had been present—archery-meetings and the like—the feeling of the county was not to be mistaken. The cold civilities of a few only made the neglect or aversion of the majority stand out in stronger relief. Brian knew, well enough, what awaited them if they should brave it out at Torrcaster ball. He guessed that the scanty circle that would rally round Bessie would be made up of courtiers, of whom even she need not be proud—a few beardless cornets, too young to be seriously compromised by any small social folly—two or three "outsiders" of the squirearchy, who might think it worth while to sacrifice somewhat of their dingy dignity to the dinners and preserves of Mote—a stranger or so from a far country, like Bertie Grenvil;

privileged offenders, when they could plead a fair face as an excuse.

For his own position, Brian had entirely ceased to care; but, on his wife's account, he was morbidly susceptible: he felt that he *could* not face the present ordeal. She herself—with all her wilfulness and self-reliance—did not feel very eager for the encounter; and when her husband expressed a reluctance to go, thought it better to acquiesce sullenly; reserving her sense of injury for a more fitting occasion.

Perhaps both were right; though, with every backward step before the tide setting against them, they lost ground never to be regained.

Did you ever, at an assembly where the notabilities of a county are gathered together, see a beautiful woman put, wholly or even partially, under the ban? Such as have assisted at such a spectacle will not lightly forget it: I think that modern civilization can show us few sadder ones. It happens, somehow, that seldom or never is a plain or unattractive female tied to this social stake: almost always it is some lovely Lady Glamis, with whom frail humanity cannot but sympathize, even if she have deserved her doom.

It is all pitiful exceedingly: the hardihood of the victim as she rears her fair white brow, defiantly, against her tormentors; striving not to betray the smart, were it by the quiver of an eyelid, while the small poisoned shafts come home,—the eager lighting-up of her face, as some ancient friend, or recent acquaintance, draws near,—the blank disappointment, harder than anger to dissemble, as the prudent knight passes by, unheeding,—the feverish triumph, in the midst of pain, when some paladin, more reckless than his brethren-in-arms, dares to wear her colours, at least for this night's tourney: more pitiful than all—to such as reverence the tenderness of womanhood—the scarcely covert exultation of the skilful archeresses, who, safe behind the rampart of the Château Vierge, smite and spare not.

You will be good enough to remember that I am not speaking of proven guilt, where the presence of the culprit is an insult to her former fellows: but only of those cases of rumour and surmise, where no worse can be alleged against the lady than the

vague Irishism,—‘She has had a blast.’ Neither am I prepared to deny that, ‘whatever is, is right?’ But—admitting the justice of the sentence—it follows not that we should delight in witnessing its execution.

Moreover, an instinct of humanity, and not one of its worst, impels us to condole—if not to side—with any one overborne by superior numbers or superior strength; and this is wholly irrespective of the righteousness of their cause. A most exemplary divine—by no means Ultra-Muscular, and Anti-Colenso to the back-bone—confessed to me, awhile ago, that, throughout the first of recorded Sacred Wars, his sympathies went consistently with the Philistines—save in the matter of Samson.

CHAPTER XXII.

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI.

IN the boudoir at Charteris Royal once more.

Darkness has set in an hour ago; one shaded lamp in a remote corner scarcely relieves the general depth of shadow; only when the oak-pile smouldering on the hearth bursts into fitful flame or a tiny volcano of sparks, the walls and hangings shoot out gleams of blue and silver; the fountain still tinkles on with the same subdued monotonous music; and the same faint exotic fragrance hangs in the air, as when you last were here.

Once more Marion is deep in a *tête-à-tête*; but this time a woman shares her confidences.

A singularly picturesque group—seen even in this imperfect light.

The fair *châtelaine* is nestling on a broad velvet cushion; her right cheek pillowed on her arms, that are crossed over her companion’s knees. The latter half reclines in the depths of a vast low lounging-chair; the hand that supports her chin coming forth a little out of the shadow, so that each flash from the embers falls

on the slender wrist and shapely fingers. In spite of the intense indolence of the attitude, you will be struck, at the very first glance, by its inexpressible grace. You cannot judge of the colour of their raiment; yet, somehow, you know that it is rich and rare; even before a fire-gleam, brighter than its fellows, brings out sheen of velvet and shimmer of gems.

Let us say a word or two as to the stranger's outward seeming—speaking as though she were now in the full daylight, under which, sooner or later, she must needs appear.

Yet to some who read, she may not be utterly a stranger. For—more years ago than are pleasant to count—I, who write, tried to sketch that same face; and failed, I daresay, as I surely should fail now.

Yet it lived once, in flesh and blood fatally fair: the face of Marmaduke Dorrillon's wife—born, Flora Bellasys.

A few summers have passed over her head since she first sat for her portrait; but no shadow of change has marred her royal beauty. The superb figure has fulfilled the promise of youth—no more; the severest sculptor could not wish it lighter by a line: the bright healthy blood mantles as richly as ever under the soft olive skin; but the clear rose-tint is not a whit too warm in colour: the features, though they bear the stamp of strong passions and stronger will, are still matchless in delicacy and refinement of outline: more liquidly lustrous than ever, dream or glitter the fathomless hazel eyes.

It is a loveliness that absolutely 'kills' the outward attractions of other women. Marion Charteris is undeniably handsome—handsome, too, in a peculiar and striking style; but when, later to-night, she stands by Lady Dorrillon's side, she will seem like a pretty fading water-colour, hung next to a fresh master-piece in oils.

Yet, in that marvellous beauty, there is something that warns you to beware. It is not such as a man, if he were wise, would wish to see near his own fire-side; not one from which he might hope to draw comfort and cheer when the day's hard work was done. It reminds you of those gorgeous tropical flowers, whose perfume is so subtle in its strength that none can long inhale it without dazing of senses and swimming of brain.

There is rather a remarkable picture, that perchance you may know. I forget how it is called ; but I think Noel Paton painted it.

A low sandy shore, over which lower leaden clouds, deepening into a night-black horizon. In the foreground a crowd of struggling figures : almost every age and craft of manhood is represented there. A portly priest, duly shaven and shorn ; a poet, with the fresh laurel wreath gleaming in his long loose hair ; a senator, in robes that ought to sweep around him in graceful dignity, but sorely dishevelled now ; a miser, griping mechanically the money-bags that could not help him here ; a lean, haggard despot, his hollow temples shadowed with the tyrannic crown ; a fair youth, with soft beardless cheeks, and lips made for tender smiles—not to be writhen thus ; and, saddest sight of all, a stalwart veteran, crushing in his mailed gripe the slight staff of Acrasia's banner. On each and every one of these faces, differing widely in feature and natural expression, the same stamp is set ; a desperate longing, a very agony of desire, marks them all ; and with this seems to mingle a sort of instinctive horror, as though they wist of their doom. Yet none the less eagerly do they press onward ; so intent on one object, that they scarcely heed other temptresses in their midst ; meaner ministers of the Queen-Syren ; who, with her mocking smile and pitiless magnetic eyes, floats in front of the throng, luring them to their graves in yonder sullen hungry sea.

Few who knew the woman ever could look on that picture without thinking of Flora Dorrillon.

They were great allies, those two : though, like many more important ones, their alliance savoured strongly of a protectorate. Self-willed and wayward as she was in most matters and with most other people, Mrs Charteris rarely stood up for her own opinion when it was in direct contradiction to the other's ; and—appreciating her own powers of fascination very highly—she would never have dreamt of pitting herself against that especial rival. Thus it was not strange that no serious disagreement should have troubled their friendship, since it was first formed soon after Marion's marriage. Nevertheless, they were not exactly in the same set ; and met oftener in their own houses than

anywhere else. John Charteris was not a rigid disciplinarian, as you are aware; but he would scarcely have allowed his wife to be regularly enrolled in the *coterie* of which Flora was the acknowledged leader.

The Flemyng flirtation had been carried on almost entirely in the country and at Rome; and it so happened that Lady Dorrillon, albeit perfectly cognizant of its rise and progress, scarcely knew the male culprit by sight.

And now Marion, having told her tale and made her moan, looked up in her friend's face for consolation and counsel. Flora liked the pretty penitent as well as it was in her nature to like any woman; nevertheless she seemed rather inclined to dally with her distress, for several moments passed before she made answer; and, as she mused, her full scarlet lips wreathed themselves into a smile, wherein there was something of satire, and a not unkindly disdain.

"There has been more folly than I dreamt of, *ma belle*. And are you quite, quite sure you have told all? Half-confessions only bewilder one. It is hardly worth while for us to play at cross-purposes; I really would help you if I could."

The dark grey eyes, that were gazing up so pleadingly, grew brighter and larger, with a surprise natural and unfeigned.

"I haven't an idea what you mean," Marion said quickly. "What could I have kept back? And what earthly reason could I have for making half-confidences to you? It's very unkind of you, Flora—and not like you a bit—to be so suspicious and unbelieving."

As Lady Dorrillon answered, her white lithe fingers strayed delicately over the pretty speaker's soft tresses; in that very fondling there was a sort of careless indifference; she might have been toying with the silky ears of her favourite spaniel.

"Don't be plaintive, please. If you are more innocent than I thought possible, there is no harm done. I certainly did suspect something more serious than what you have confessed. It seems I gave you too little credit for common sense, or—too much; for I never heard of such costly child's-play. Then you are quite sure that he has no hold on you whatever, except your unlucky sins upon paper?"

Marion was not puzzled now; she understood the other's meaning right well. The flush deepening on her cheek came not from the red flickering embers.

Weak, even to wickedness, are many natures, even when not wholly perverted. Instead of feeling thankful that she had nothing worse than reckless coquetry to own, she felt, for the moment, almost ashamed of her innocence in the presence of the beautiful cynic who, from the height of superior science, smiled down on the novice with a sort of contemptuous pity.

I write 'science' advisedly. For no one knew, of a surety, how far Flora Dorrillon carried out in practice the tenets of her evil philosophy. It was popularly believed that her principle was to take all—giving little or nothing in return. This much was certain; no favourite had ever yet been established so thoroughly in her good graces as to avoid disgrace—and disgrace without warning—when a fresh caprice was to be gratified; she would cast a heart aside, when she had drained it dry, as you would fling away an empty fruit-rind. But the world could only babble on surmise. Of all whom her fatal fascinations had lured to moral, if not to social wreck, never a one had bewailed defeat aloud, much less boasted of victory.

There is a sad story, told by Lever right well, of a veteran of the Great Army, who was brought to a court-martial for having carried out a secret order of Napoleon. Very long and piteously the criminal looked for help into the pitiless marble face of his chief, who could have saved him with a word; and, finding there no leave to speak, accepted the extremity of dishonour rather than put in one justifying plea; till at last his brain reeled under the agony, and he went forth from before his judges hopelessly insane; never more to utter any intelligible words, save these—

"Silence, à la mort."

Even so, Flora Dorrillon's victims—having broken plight with all others, and trampled duty under foot—never forgot that one *consigne*; and, to the very end, kept faith with their betrayer.

The absurd compunctions above alluded to Mrs Charteris would scarcely have owned to herself: you may be sure she was not tempted to confess them, even to her confidential friend. In-

deed, her disclaimer was as plain and positive as could be desired, and carried conviction with it irresistibly.

"I see my way now," Flora said, decisively. "I think we can get you out of this scrape, *mignonne*; and it will be a good lesson for you. Now I know as well as possible what you're going to say. 'If you are once quite safe you'll never flirt again.' How very childish! You'll flirt to-night, and to-morrow, and to the very end of your appointed time. It isn't worth while making vows to me, especially as I don't mean to set you any further penance; indeed, I don't think it likely you will fall into such a trap again. What puzzles me is—how you ever were caught at all. Any one who could act so very basely, as this man seems to have done of late, ought hardly to have been fatal to your peace of mind. There's the danger of derogating, my dear; you never know exactly where you are, or what is coming next. Denzil Ranksborough would hardly play you such a trick as this on any provocation. You had better choose your *cavalieri* from our own set for the future. Now—tell the truth—did you ever really care for Mr Flemyng?"

Once again Marion blushed slightly; as she mused for a second or two, the soft pensive smile was playing on her lip, that is usually provoked by a pleasant or tender memory. She ought to have been sketched just then; as she looked up into Flora's face with a charming expression of mock penitence.

"Well—I don't know. I'm afraid I did care a little at one time, after a quiet fashion. It seems strange now, of course. But he really could be very nice when he liked. And then—we were such very old friends. I'm sure I never meant any harm from first to last. That is what makes it more cruel of him to torment me so."

Lady Dorrillon shrugged her beautiful shoulders, as if her friend's simple sophistry was not worth sifting or refuting.

"If it was so, it can't be helped," she said with a little sigh. "It's no use scolding you now. A much graver question is—do you care the least bit in the world for him at this moment?"

A grave question? Graver, in truth, than either wist of.

Walking through forest-land, ever and anon we come across an ash, or beech, or elm, on the bole of which is painted a rude red

cross ; in the root there is no sign of decay ; the branches flourish wide and fair ; yet we know that the hollow mouldering pollard hard by is not more surely doomed : the woodman's hands may be full for the present, but it is a simple question of months or weeks or days ; before the leaves are green again that trunk will cumber the ground no longer, but make room for its luckier fellows.

Let us use, once again, the most ancient of all similes, comparing man to a tree. There was nothing solemn or menacing about that pretty pair ; they looked no more like judges than the dainty boudoir looked like a Star Chamber. Nevertheless, then and there, on Vincent Flemyng's life the death-mark was set.

Perhaps some instinctive consciousness made Marion pause ; and, when she did answer, her light laugh may have dissembled a vague trouble or fear.

"No—I am sure I don't care for him now," she said, with a firmness that cost her an effort. "The foolish fancy was over long ago ; if there had been any danger of a relapse I should have been thoroughly cured the other night. I wish, sometimes, we could be friends again. But I suppose there is no chance of that?"

"Not the faintest," Lady Dorrillon retorted. "Once more—you must be quite frank with yourself, as well as with me. I cannot help you, unless you can give Mr Flemyng up absolutely, without reserve, except, of course, as an ordinary acquaintance. I will not be hampered with regrets and repinings on your part, much less with jealousy. That last would be especially inconvenient, you know. Don't look scandalized, it's quite possible to be jealous, after one has ceased to care, or—where would our small vanity be?"

"Scandalized" was hardly the word to describe the expression of Mrs Charteris' face, as she gazed up at her companion with bewildered eyes.

"You—you don't mean to say, that you will take charge of him yourself?" she said, as soon as she could recover breath.

"What else could I mean?" Flora answered, carelessly. "I see no other effectual way of helping you. You might look a little more grateful, my Marion. Can devotion go farther than

throwing myself in the enemy's path to draw off his fire and give one's friend time to escape? To speak the truth, I rather want amusement just now, and this affair has so many new lights and shadows in it, that it promises to be quite picturesque."

The cool way in which the other took it for granted that she had only to will it, to detach her own sworn servant, was almost too much for Mrs Charteris' equanimity.

"You make sure of success, at all events," she said, rather petulantly.

"Perfectly sure, *ma toute belle*; it being understood that you stand aloof and waive all possible claims. I am not greatly afraid of any other rival who is likely to appear here."

Under the mock-deference of the reply there sparkled a covert satire, sufficiently provoking. But Marion's brief irritation was over already; she was too wise to quarrel over phrases with one who was ready to help her in her time of need; besides this, you know that she had an unlimited respect for Flora's powers of fascination, even when compared with her own. She sank back again very meekly into the attitude in which you found her, and answered in her prettiest coaxing way,—

"I don't think it would make much difference, dear, even if I did try to keep him. I believe it's all true that men say of your sorceries, you terrible witch! But are you not afraid for yourself—knowing what Vincent Flemyng is capable of?"

A fitful flash from the embers lighted up the superb hazel eyes, glittering in disdain; and the scarlet lip curling.

"Afraid? Afraid of a spiteful boy like that—and forewarned too. Thanks for the compliment. I would make you such a pretty curtsy if I were not so comfortable here. No: I think we may venture to try conclusions, even with such an unscrupulous diplomat as *le sieur* Flemyng."

There was a silence for a minute or two: then Marion spoke softly—almost timidly.

"Don't be angry, dear. I am not regretting Vincent now; and this is my very, very last moment of weakness. I can't help remembering that he is scarcely more than a boy; and I can't help fearing that you will work him some deadly harm; without intending it, perhaps. But—Ah, Flora, you have no pity."

The beautiful face did not become set or stern ; yet a certain change came over it ; reminding you of a picture unskilfully glazed, so that colours—softly blended before—seem contrasted hardly ; and the grave grey eyes looked, not into her companion's, but straight into the fire—strangely steady and firm. If some of Flora's victims could have watched her countenance while that change abode there, it might have saved them many a heart-ache—if warnings can ever save.

"No pity? You are right. And shall I tell you why? It is because men who are really men—true, brave, and strong—have nothing to fear from *us*. As for the others—what pity do they deserve? Don't they take, every day, women as good—if not as well born and well taught—as you and I, and fling them aside when their fancy palls, like their faded yellow roses. Do you suppose any one of these would halt if he saw our dishonour at the end of the path that it pleased him to take? I shall never pity any living man again. Yes—I do pity one, sometimes—my own husband."

There was no change in the indolent grace of her posture ; her voice never rose a note above its wonted measure of harmony ; but the bitter earnestness of the speaker sent a shiver through Marion Charteris' nerves, which were remarkably steady as a rule.

"I can't bear to hear you speak so," she whispered ; drawing closer to her friend, as frightened children do. "You will make me wish I had told you nothing."

Lady Dorrillon's face softened instantly : she laughed a little low laugh, marvellously musical, though slightly tinged with mockery

"I was on the very verge of heroics. It is all your fault, *ma mignonne*. You provoked me by becoming tearful over a creature like that, who would make capital out of your foolish notes, just as a dishonest clerk might out of papers that don't belong to him. I can't see much difference between demanding money and insisting on compromising concessions : it's simply extortion in either case. But don't concern yourself for Mr Flemyng : he has nothing worse to fear than a sharp lesson, which I think he greatly needs. Now, I am going to send you back to the others :

they have been wearying for you—at least some one has—this half-hour, I know. And I must write one or two letters before I dress. You must play your own part naturally; it's not a difficult one. But don't overdo confidence in trying to show that you are not afraid. I only want you to trust me, now: you shall thank me, when you can sing, with a safe conscience—*Il biglietto; eccolo quà.*”

So—having first dropped a light kiss on her companion's upturned brow—(I suppose no feminine covenant is binding without this seal)—Flora Dorrillon broke up the cabinet-council, and went her way.

For some minutes after she was left alone the expression of Marion's face was pensive, if not melancholy. As she mused her lips parted once, and two words escaped them:

“Poor Vincent!”

There was nothing like sharp sorrow or heavy sadness in her tone, but rather a vague passing regret, such as one might feel, —standing by the grave of a friend over whose head the tomb-slab was laid years and years ago. Then she rose, and shook out the folds of her ample raiment, and straightened a tress that had fallen awry; smiling that suppressed half-smile of contentment that is rarely absent from a fair woman's face when she stands before her tiring-glass. Even so, you may see some beautiful bird ‘preening’ her ruffled plumage after a storm-shower. When Mrs Charteris joined the circle in the green drawing-room not a trace of trouble lingered on her smooth brow or in her laughing eyes: she was thoroughly and naturally herself again—brilliant in outspoken banter; caressive in whispered confidences.

When Vincent Flemyng arrived, shortly before the dressing-gong sounded, she welcomed him with her wonted impulsive cordiality; albeit the announcement of his name broke up a most promising *tête-à-tête*, in which Denzil, tenth Baron of Ranksborough, had deigned to evince some slight signs of vitality.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SNAKE CHARMING.

ONE of the most popular of English living writers—good on all points, but especially good in his pleasant practical philosophy—remarked awhile ago on that natural law which obliges every grown male to face his liabilities, moral if not financial, whilst performing certain portions of his morning toilette. It seems to me that the aphorism applies, in a modified shape, also to the ante-prandial hour wherein a man dons leisurely, piece by piece, his evening harness. Ordinary mortals—with no definite object in view, or conversational reputation to sustain—finding themselves under a strange roof, on the point of confronting a large mixed society, are apt at such a season to take stock of their resources and prospects.

So Vincent Flemyng—sitting, half-drowsily, over the blazing fire in his comfortable chamber whilst his servant made the last necessary preparations—fell, inevitably, to musing over his position at Charteris Royal. His speculations were very parti-coloured.

Turning the roseate side outwards first—there was the pleasant fact of being established in the best possible quarters, with every chance of retaining them so long as it should please him to tarry; the recollection that he was there, rather by his own will than from the free invitation of others, did not damp his triumph just then, for it brought with it a grateful consciousness of power. Besides, the tones of Marion's welcome were yet ringing in his ears; was it not likely that she had already repented of her vagaries, and—far from bearing malice—was ready to make peace and amends, after the fashion of bygone days?

But, in folding and re-folding any mantle whatsoever, the dark lining must sooner or later be revealed. Ere long the hue of Vincent's meditations began to change disagreeably. He was both prompt and pertinacious in his resentments, as you know:

he had conceived an antipathy—not unmixed with dread—of Denzil Ranksborough, from the first moment of their meeting in the town-hall of Torrcaster: he could not disguise from himself that the man who had supplanted him seemed dangerously at home here. Moreover, Flemyng's eyes were sharp enough to have remarked, on entering the green drawing-room, that Ranksborough was sitting alone, and aloof from the rest of the party: it needed no very vivid or suspicious imagination to fill up the blank space at his side. With that, rose the memory of certain glances that Vincent had intercepted, in the course of that same evening at Torrcaster; he could not misconstrue these, any more than that look of mingled aversion and scorn, when Marion rose under his hand and defied him. In truth, the *châtelaine* of Charteris Royal, enthroned in the midst of her own set, appeared a much less impressionable and assailable personage than the Fiametta of eighteen months back. Eighteen months? Why, it seemed as many years since he heard her so re-christened.

Besides all this, there was the reluctance, common to most men of his temperament, when they have to encounter a company of comparative strangers. For, with all his vanity and outward superciliousness, Flemyng's self-possession and self-reliance were really below par: though he owned it not to himself, and would never have forgiven you had you hinted at such a possibility, he felt ill at ease in certain presences and situations—not so much from natural shyness as from want of nerve. He felt instinctively that he had little sympathy to expect from the society then assembled at Charteris Royal: neither was the master of the house likely to afford him countenance or support. Only under one banner could he hope to battle successfully: *il fallait arborer le cotillon*.

Now this state of things is exceedingly depressing and discouraging even to persons of strong or stolid mind.

Some years ago, half-a-score of men were sitting round the dinner-table of a pleasant country-house, not many leagues from Doncaster. It was the evening of a Leger very disastrous to backers; and nearly every one present had been plunging more or less heavily. But they were a tolerably seasoned lot, and thus far had taken their punishment gallantly if not gaily. At a very

late hour, some demon—cloaking his malice under the specious pretext of ‘what is due to society’—prompted one of the party to observe—

“Don’t you think it’s about time we joined the ladies?”

There was a pause; and then made answer a cynic, bolder than the rest—

“How can we do that—*when they haven’t got a single feeling in common with us?*”

The dreadful truth of the objection (for only the males had gone in to Doncaster that day), added to the contrast of present defeat with the hopeful speculations of the evening before, struck every one, only too forcibly. The proposer of the move looked in his fellows’ faces; and—finding there only the reflection of his own discontent—gave up the suggestion, with a dreary laugh; and they all fell again to moody drinking.

Just at this point in Flemyng’s reflections, he chanced to remember that hint of Marion’s, concerning some great attraction that he was to meet at Charteris Royal. He had forgotten those words almost as soon as they were spoken; but he turned his head lazily now, to ask his servant if he knew who were staying in the house, and who had come that day.

The man had not had time to gather a complete list; but he ran over seven or eight names; amongst them were those of Sir Marmaduke and Lady Dorrillon.

The slight start that Vincent could not repress must have been as purely instinctive and unaccountable as the shiver which, according to old wives’ tales, warns us that a foot is treading on our grave. He had never been near enough to Lady Dorrillon to touch the hem of her garment; and he had only seen her about a score of times, in the Park or at the Opera; for Vincent had never yet entered into London society—properly so called. On each and every one of these occasions he had been impressed—as who was not?—with her marvellous beauty; and had, perhaps, once or twice watched with a vague envy the coming and going of such “gilded youths” as had the *entrée* to her box on the grand tier. But it had never entered even into his vanity to conceive that he could himself be brought actually within the range of her artillery. Nor, indeed, did it so occur to him now. After that

utterly unexplicable start of surprise, he felt only that disinterested gratification, mingling with a faint curiosity, that might affect any of us, finding ourselves unexpectedly under the same roof with some royal or famous personage. If he speculated at all, it was to wonder who might chance to be the lady's favourite for the nonce; with a shadowy idea of gaining some useful hints from their proceedings.

The sum of Vincent's meditations came to this. He would secure a few confidential words with Marion as soon as possible. If he attained no other advantage, he would at least be able to ascertain his own position more clearly, and become aware of the general "lie" of the social ground at Charteris Royal. He knew that it was the lady's habit, to be first in the state-saloon wherein the guests assembled before dinner; and he resolved to bring off one of the brief *tête-à-têtes* that had been not unfrequently managed in the old times. He was wise enough to be aware that he had pushed intimidation quite far enough already; and was now prepared to accept any decent overtures of peace without scanning the conditions too closely.

With these magnanimous intentions, the gallant addressed himself to the business of his toilette without further delay; and got through it as rapidly as was consistent with a little extra in certain details; such as the arrangement of the profuse glossy hair which was still one of the best points in his personal appearance.

About a quarter before eight, Vincent laid his hand on the lock of the state drawing-room; with a confidential smile ready on his lip, that meant—all sorts of things; condonation of the past; intelligence for the present; solicitation for the future. With this expression—really artistic in its way—he intended to bear down upon Marion, as she sate in her favourite corner, near the further angle of the huge fire-place, and facing the main entrance.

As the heavy oak swung noiselessly on its cunningly-wrought hinge a low murmur came from within: as Flemyng stood still and listened mechanically, he could discern two voices; one of which he knew for Marion Charteris' A bitter blasphemy crept out between his teeth—he had grown terribly apt at curs-

ing of late—as he thought whose that other might be? For ten seconds or so he hesitated whether to advance or retire; then he entered; clearing his brow as best he might, for he felt it lowering sullenly

But the cloud lifted from his face before he had gone three steps beyond the threshold; for then he was aware that one of her own sex was Marion's solitary companion.

The stranger was sitting with her back to the door; she never stirred from her half-reclining posture as it opened; and never stayed the slow sway to-and-fro of the gorgeous feather-screen, which she seemed to hold rather as a plaything than a guard; for a jutting angle of the ponderous carved mantel shielded her from direct fire-heat. So, as Vincent Flemmyng advanced, he only saw the topmost tresses of a smooth dark coronal; and here and there the soft subdued shimmer that comes only from perfect pearls. But he knew as well as if he had perused the picture at his leisure, that he was looking then on a beauty world-renowned; and that ten steps more would bring him face to face with Flora Dorrillon.

As I have said before, Vincent would have resented the imputation of bashfulness as a mortal insult: nevertheless, it is certain that he would have waxed nervously diffident then, had time been given him to think. But, before he quite reached her side, Marion Charteris looked up, with her merriest glance of mischief; and beckoned him nearer with a sort of impatience.

"How dreadfully slow and languid every one is now-a-days. Vincent—you glide into the room as if you were going to tread a minuet; and Flora—you won't rouse yourself for three seconds; though I've been setting my heart on this meeting for ever so long. And it is so lucky that it should happen before any of the stupid people come down. I mean you two to be the greatest allies. Such very old friends of mine might dispense with formalities. But wait—I'll go through the ceremony properly."

She rose, and performed the presentation in due course, with a courtly stateliness wonderfully graceful in despite of its mock-solemnity.

In Lady Dorrillon's smile there was less of mirth than of apology and appeal: it said, as plainly as if the words had been uttered,

"You know this madcap, as well as I do? You won't hold me accountable for her wild humour?"

And the long lash-fringes were lifted slowly, till the full light of her earnest eyes rested on Vincent's face; dwelling there whilst she went on speaking.

"I am very glad we have met at last, Mr Flemyng. I have heard so much of you of late, that you hardly seem a stranger now. And from others besides Marion. Did you know that Everard St John was a cousin of mine? He has talked of nothing but your Nile voyage since he came back; except when he has bemoaned his being prevented going on with you through Palestine. He has shown me some sketches, too—only two or three—just enough to make me long to see more of your handiwork. It would be odd if we did not get on well, for a little while at least: we have so much common ground to talk on."

As she ended she held out her hand, quite naturally and frankly. Yet in that action there was nothing brusque or bold; but rather a graceful waiving of superfluous ceremony.

If you have at all realized the overweening vanity, and extreme sensitiveness as to his own social position, that were salient points in Vincent Flemyng's character, you will be able to form a fair idea of his state of mind at this especial moment.

In all his life he had never felt so triumphantly elated. It has been hinted before that, even in earlier days, he was not insensible to certain solid advantages, not of the most creditable nature, attaching to the post of cavalier-in-waiting to Mrs Charteris; the recollection of these may have helped to fan his wrath, when he saw—or thought he saw—himself supplanted. It is shameful to write, but true. At the bottom of Vincent Flemyng's passion lay, not only intense selfishness, but a calculating fore-cast most unusual with men of his years. He had come over to-day, in full confidence of wringing some valuable concessions from Marion, even if it were hopeless to regain her

favour: but such a triumph as this had never entered into his dreams of dictation.

A new vista in life seemed to open before him, as name after name rose in his memory, of men far removed above their fellows in rank and wealth and power, if not in virtue or wisdom, who had, from time to time, glittered in the courtly circle that called Flora Dorrillon queen. In that circle might not he—Vincent Flemyng—be already numbered? Had not the Sovereign herself—of whose imperial caprice so many tales were told—promised him advancement even before she claimed his homage? He was on terms of *tutoiement*—at second-hand—with these two fair women already; for his own Christian name seemed to mingle naturally with theirs. That first familiar address was a great, if unintentional, stroke of Marion's policy.

Altogether, Vincent was so perturbed that he could hardly mutter some incoherent common-places, as he bent over the slender gloved hand—rather lower than courtesy demanded; so low indeed that the gesture wanted but little to have made it a salute.

Would it have taught him caution or distrust if he had looked behind him just then, and marked the scornful mischief gleaming in his old love's eyes?

All this, which is so long on paper, was brief enough in action: yet the time for confidences was passed almost before Flemyng stood erect again. For the centre-door opened, to admit one guest after another in rapid succession. But Flora Dorrillon was none of those who do their work negligently. The faintest possible gesture of her fan told Vincent that he need not stir from her side just yet: indeed, though she favoured others with a few careless words, as it were in passing, she did not virtually break off her talk with him till dinner was announced.

That talk had turned only on the most ordinary topics conceivable: nevertheless, as Vincent followed in the wake of the others, he was sensible of a strange bewildering lightness of heart and brain, mingling with a keen pleasure, that made the pulse throb almost painfully: he remembered vaguely having felt much the same, whilst yielding to the influence of his first

dose of *hachis*. It was lucky that neither of his neighbours at table were disposed to draw heavily upon Flemyng's conversational bank; for it is most certain that such drafts would, that night, have been recklessly dishonoured.

There were the elements of a tolerably pleasant party there; if one were in form to appreciate them. It is not worth while to give a *catalogue raisonné*; but one or two more figures may be picked out, that you may the better realize the scene-accessories amidst which the chief characters move.

Do you see that dainty dame, dressed in the very perfection of quiet taste; sitting, as it were, in the shadow of the huge centre-pyramid of foliage and flowers, so that the light of the chandeliers falls on her with a chastened brilliance? That is Lady Greystoke—not lightly to be spoken of by whoso admires Art in all its branches: she is probably the choicest extant master-piece of cosmetic science.

"A perfect picture"—says Flora Dorrillon; scanning her critically through the mask of leaves.

The words are not more malicious than true. It would be well for many of our modern *tintoretti* if they bestowed as much care in choosing and laying on their colours as Lady Greystoke's artists expend on their handiwork. She began 'painting' quite early in life—none knew why—when her complexion could have faced any scrutiny, unaided: she has gone on painting ever since; not straining after absurd juvenility; but gently toning down the evidences of advancing years; she has allowed a soft sprinkle of silver already to appear amongst her glossy braids; and she will glide gracefully down the decline till she shall show us how old age can be charming without ceasing to be venerable: but—she will paint, to the very end; and murmur perchance with her latest breath—

Give this cheek a little red;

One would not, sure, be frightful when one's dead.

The man on Lady Greystoke's right, emphasizing his rapid utterance with a mobile energy of gesture and incessant eye-twinkle, is Robert De Visme; also a remarkably clever person in his way.

Despite his foreign patronymic, and rather foreign vivacity of manner, he is an Englishman bred and born; not particularly well bred or born either. For many years he was a hard-working barrister fairly successful, if not eminent in his profession: it was not very long ago that they made him Commissioner of Unstamped Deeds. From his earliest start in life he had had one object steadfastly before him—a seat in the high places of society: for this he had worked patiently and sedulously, as many work for a seat on the Woolsack. He was not only himself a capital talker, but possessed the rarer talent of making others talk in their turn: after spending an evening in his company you might fail to recollect any single brilliant witticism falling from De Visme's own lips; but you would certainly remember that the conversation had never once languished; and would, perchance, be impressed with an agreeable conviction of having contributed your own full share to the general amusement. Men began to ask him to mess, or to their bachelor dinners, long before they thought of introducing him to their home-circles, or to their feminine relatives: but invitations of a somewhat informal character to river picnics and the like out-door festivities began at last to drop in: thenceforward he found his way, slowly but surely, upward, till he settled into his present position, which he holds, as he holds his Commissionership, 'for life, and during good behaviour.'

From the moment that his foot was set fairly down within the Inner Circle, Robert De Visme took his own line, and has kept it ever since. He knew right well that Beauty is never more avid of homage than when she can arrogate it no longer: he knew how keenly ears—once disdainfully deaf—watch for the highest sound, when

Parcius junctas quatiant fenestras
Ictibus crebris juvenes protervi;

and he turned this knowledge to good account. Leaving to those who are 'to the manner born,' the budding charms of spring, and the maturer glories of summer, he has constituted himself the squire of such dames as must own to late autumn,

if not to early winter. In rendering this devotion, he ran, you will perceive, no risk whatever: his own peace of mind was, evidently, as safe as that of the ancient matrons whom he delighted to honour: beyond the grand climacteric there is a casemate—safe if somewhat dreary—proof against all the artillery of scandal. But these harmless *petits soins* he knew how to invest with an earnestness and air of reality which saved them from insipidity; the anecdotes, too, with which his talk was thickly studded were always sufficiently spiced to suit the palate of his hearers; so that the Pompadour *en retraite* in the draught of mawkish water found all the flavour of the old forbidden wine.

In counting on quinquagenarian gratitude De Visme reckoned not without his hostesses: his table, during the season, is strewn with as many cards as that of the most eligible guardsman; and the doors are open to him of more country-houses than he has time to enter. He might have married more than once advantageously in point of rank and money; but he has enough, and more than enough, for his needs; and is well aware that he would not better his position by altering his state. So, though Lady Greystoke—his ‘first mistress’ for the nonce—is a widow of some years’ standing, neither she nor the rest of the world are likely to misconstrue his attentions.

That elderly man, near the upper end of the table, with a fine benevolent face, and hair like white spun-glass—leaning forward with an air of gentle deference, to answer a laughing remark of Mrs Charteris—is also a noteworthy character.

Cecil Castlemaine is the younger brother of a penniless earl: he started in social business some two-score years ago, with a patrimony of three thousand pounds, his wits, and the honourable handle to his name. One division of his capital was spent in about eighteen months; the other two have maintained him ever since, living on the fatlings and first-fruits of the land.

Trainer in ordinary to the Nobility. There you have his profession: though only tacitly acknowledged it has long been as clearly defined as if he dated his letters from Middleham or

Isley. Yet there is not the faintest taint of the Mulberry Hawk about Cis Castlemaine. He neither plunders his pupil in person nor stands in with other robbers; but, as far as lies in his power, will prevent the youth from being bled more freely than is good for a plethoric financialist. When the heir to the Marquisate of Carabbas comes to his own, and requires that his house be set in order, or 'mounted,' as becomes his station, he betakes himself to Mr Castlemaine, and prays that respectable personage to tarry with him till all these things be completed. There is no compact, of course, verbal or written; but all is not the less thoroughly understood. Nor does Cecil acknowledge that he underlies any obligation in thus living in perpetual free-quarters. Independently of his own practical usefulness to his entertainers, he considers it the bounden duty of wealthy and well-born youths to minister to the necessities of the veterans in their own class; such necessities being the *primeurs* of every clime. With the newly-enriched plebeian, until after the third generation, he will have nought to do.

Truly Cecil is anything but a vulgar parasite. His manner—perfect at all times—savours of the deference of the Old School, with womankind: but with his own sex he is more apt to lead than to follow; in his extreme of courtesy there is not a shadow of obsequiousness. His manner of speaking is slow and somewhat solemn, without being exactly sententious; and at times there is a sort of suave sternness in his demeanour that rarely fails of producing its effect. The most pampered menials were never known to treat Mr Castlemaine lightly or irreverently: indeed, in certain establishments, such as have been already alluded to, you would see the servants occasionally look to him for orders, even in presence of their natural lord. And so he floats contentedly down the Great Stream, attracting the envy, if not the admiration of many; in very truth, though it is difficult to respect, it is impossible quite to despise him.

His present charge is that small pale youth, whose smooth face is stamped with such a palpable impress of precocious cunning that it reminds you irresistibly of the legends concerning fairy changelings.

Lionel Hardress comes of a very ancient and wealthy stock ; the scions of which, for many generations, have been more famous for their vices than their virtues. The present representative of the family is not likely to compromise himself by any extravagant follies or costly sins. But if the spirits that led his forefathers astray have departed from him, there has come in their stead a cold selfish avaricious devil, worse—some would think—than all the other seven. He took to the Turf before he was fairly of age, and in the first year of his apprenticeship contrived to make himself both disliked and distrusted by the more reputable members of the craft: even the ring-men are beginning to be shy already about meddling with his money, either as backers or layers; and deem it best to leave the Hardress ‘good things’ entirely alone. He is by no means a pupil after Cis Castlemaine’s heart; and people say that ere long the tutor will give sharp and sudden warning.

One more sketch—and a sadder one—again of a man far advanced in years; who sits on Marion Charteris’ left hand.

In those features there are still traces of a personal beauty, in spite of the weary pain-stricken look which is, plainly, habitual there. There is a haggard watchful expression in the eyes, half-timorous withal; the frequent nervous smiles are so mechanically courteous, that they light not up his face a whit. If you are easily moved at sight of human misery, I think you would begin to pity that old man before hearing his name: if you did not so, after learning his story, you would be harder of heart than—*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*.

In the latter days of the Regency, Sir Marmaduke Dorrillon was at the zenith of his evil fame; about this period he fought that famous night-duel which some ancient gossips in Florence have scarcely yet forgotten. He had succeeded one of his own countrymen in the good graces of a fair Marchesa; the latter boasted one afternoon, at the Casino d’ Nobili, somewhat too loudly of a certain love-token which he still wore. Sir Marmaduke only heard of this after sun-down; and the two men crossed swords before the moon was high. The Englishman knew himself to be less cunning of fence, and deliberately exposed his own left side; when he felt the cold steel in his

shoulder he threw himself forward on the blade, and drove his own home, till hilt and breast-bone clashed. That same night, at the Opera, Dorrillon sat, in his accustomed place, close behind the Marchesa's white shoulder. He tarried not long; only long enough to give the lady back the trinket which had cost a life; and to whisper a few words that made her cheek paler than his own; then, in the sight of all Florence, he kissed her hand in courtly farewell, and went his way—to see her face no more.

Perhaps Sir Marmaduke was not worse than the other dandy-devils of that wild time; nevertheless, it may be presumed that in his hot youth and fiery manhood he did rather more than his fair share of mischief to man and woman—to foe and friend. If it was so, retribution has rarely been more complete on this side of the grave than that which has fallen on him.

He loves his wife, not with a sober paternal affection suited to the difference in their years, but with the helpless, consuming passion which is often the heaviest curse of undisciplined old age. He is so nervously afraid of irritating her that he dares not even look disapprobation of any of her proceedings; indeed, his whole life is spent in striving to anticipate her caprices; thinking himself overpaid for the costliest sacrifice by a faint careless smile, or a cold formal caress.

But you will see more of Flora's husband anon.

There are more faces round that table, that would scarcely pass unnoticed in a crowd: but you need not pause to examine them; for some you know already, and others may as well remain strange to you for aught that they have to do with this tale of ours.

Yet you may find something amusing, if not instructive, if for a few seconds you watch Bertie Grenvil.

The Cherub's countenance is a perfect study of mild melancholy: it is only too plain that he is endeavouring—not unsuccessfully—to induce his neighbour to sympathize with his sorrows. By all that's atrocious—the neighbour is no other than Minnie Carrington.

Mrs Charteris, despite the press of her own affairs, had found leisure to remark that promising flirtation at the Torrcaster ball.

Being exceedingly good-natured and indulgent in these matters—on the *haud ignara mali* principle—she has asked the Carringtons to dine and sleep, quite out of their turn ; for the ordinary Chalkshire squirearchy are invited to Charteris Royal according to a regular ‘roster.’

The mother—a good woman, but vain and weak withal—could not bring herself to put aside the unwonted honour ; but she has begun to repent herself ere this, and tries to counteract her imprudence by shooting volleys of warning glances at her daughter, accompanied by short sharp coughs at intervals : the poor lady might as well reserve herself for the reprimand which will, sooner or later to-night, be Minnie’s portion ; for the damsel’s eyes and ears have just now a special retainer.

Bertie Grenvil knows how to ride a mile-race as well as most men ; and he is forcing the running remorselessly. Minnie has found courage—not without much blushing and pretty hesitations—to attempt a little meek chaff on his celestial nickname ; requesting to be enlightened as to its origin, &c.

To which the Cherub makes answer with a diabolical gravity—
“It was because I was so very innocent when I joined ; and so childishly easy to be imposed upon. And I’m not a bit harder or wiser now, Miss Carrington. If you only knew how dreadfully people take advantage of me—your sex, worst of all. But one wouldn’t so much mind being trampled upon, if they would be a little sorry for one sometimes. You’re all so pitiless ; that’s the worst of it.”

And Minnie—having some vague intention of putting in a disclaimer of mercilessness on her own account—looks up timidly in the speaker’s face ; but her long lashes droop in a sullen shyness nearly akin to fear ; and she subsides into roseate silence. Of a truth, there are not many women of her innocence and age, who—when he means mischief in earnest—can meet, untroubled, Bertie Grenvil’s eyes.

And, all this while, Vincent Flem yng sits, like one in a dream, eating and drinking mechanically what is set before him, with an utter disregard of the proper succession of meats or mixture of liquors. If he rouses himself for a moment from his reverie, his glances wander not towards the top of the long table, where

Lord Ranksborough holds the right-hand place, but rather towards the lower end, where, in the proximity of Lady Dorrillon, John Charteris' arid conversational powers have been forced into unnatural bloom; whilst his dull respectable face hangs out temporary illumination in her honour.

CHAPTER XXIV

COFFEE AND A CHASSE.

It was more the spirit of perversity and contradiction than the ancient attraction which caused Flemyng to manœuvre his way to Mrs Charteris' side, almost immediately on entering the green drawing-room.

Only Lady Greystoke was sitting very near Marion; and the ears of that excellent lady—naturally discreet—had waxed somewhat duller of late, from causes over which she had no control. It would have been a fair chance enough for explanation or settling of differences, had Vincent been that way inclined; but—far from this—he only felt anxious to keep as far as possible on safe neutral ground. Nevertheless, it was absolutely necessary to make some allusion to what had passed awhile before: there were certain rough edges, left on the breaking-off of their last confidential converse, which needs must be planed and polished away.

“Do you know what I come for?” Vincent said, in a subdued voice, which yet discreetly avoided a whisper. “It is for absolution. I’ve been restless from repentance ever since Wednesday night. I don’t think I could close my eyes under your roof unless I heard again that you would forget and forgive. I can’t think how I could have been so rude and overbearing. But you must have known that I could never mean seriously to threaten. Just say ‘Go in peace’—it won’t take you long—and then I will trouble you no more.”

Once again, for the very last time, Marion’s heart—a warm and

kindly one in despite of the many faults that warped it—softened towards Vincent Flemyng. Her dark grey eyes were rather sad as they rested wistfully on his face.

“Yes—I can forgive freely—now ; and forget, in a little while, all that is worth forgetting. I would far rather not believe that you could ever be deliberately cruel. It would be so easy to prove it, too : if you would only—Vincent—you know what I mean.”

Though the words were scarcely audible by the ears for which they were intended, the strange earnestness of the speaker did not escape Lady Greystoke, sitting hard by : but that discreet dame only shifted her own position slightly so as to screen Marion’s face from general inspection ; and then looked straight to her front, betraying no further consciousness by the shadow of a sign.

If Flemyng’s heart had been large enough to hold common honesty—to say nothing of honour ; if he could only have met frankness with frankness, and confidence with confidence ; it might not have gone so hardly with him in the after-time. But this was just what he could not do. He thought within himself—

“This is what she has been aiming at all along ; with her soft seductive ways and sham cordiality. She only waits to be quite free, to throw off the mask, and set me at defiance. But she may serve me well yet ; from fear, if not from love. So—shall I give her back those letters ? Not if I know my own mind and my own interests.”

Curiously enough, the new sensations that had sprung up within him, since he fancied that Flora Dorrillon’s smile encouraged him to hope, made him less inclined to be generous to the woman who had paved the way for him there : the commercial value—socially speaking—of Marion Charteris rose with each fresh evidence of her power. Besides, to a vanity like Flemyng’s, it was intensely gratifying to hold the lure to which so beautiful a tercel must needs stoop, whether she would or no ; it was not likely that of his own free will he could cast away hood and jesses.

It is hard to write—perhaps, not pleasant to read—of such

baseness. But this is not a story of Dreamland, where all things are done decently and in order. If you write of this coarse work-day world, you can no more ignore certain repulsive phases of character than you can write a history of London without mention of its courts and purlieus. It is not wise or needful to linger over a disagreeable subject any more than it is to *flâner* in an unsavoury alley. But in our walks abroad, whether it be the body or the mind that wanders, be sure that we shall see the sordid oftener than the savage side of crime.

You will remember being warned long ago of the black drop in Flemyng's nature that was sure sooner or later to come to the surface, so that you were not tricked into any false interest in his fortunes. True it is, that actual yellow dross never entered into Vincent's speculations: with this single exception, he seems not a whit more deserving of sympathy than that ingenious gentleman—lord of vague Pyrenean *hectares*—who a while ago made his plaint before the Marlburian judgment-seat, and found a worthy Gallio sitting there. Yet, in despite of his cynicism, natural and acquired, Flemyng made but a poor business of evasion and denial: to affect to misunderstand Marion would have been too absurd.

"I guess what you mean"—he murmured hurriedly. "You—you shall have back all you want: really, you shall. But—I—I've brought nothing with me here."

He was lying; and she knew it; she would have known it if the nervous tremor of his tone had not helped to convict him. At that instant the latest spark of pity or tenderness for her old playmate died in Marion Charteris' breast, as suddenly as if a torrent of ice-water had swept athwart it. The very fact of realizing the position would have given her courage and self-possession, had either been lacking. Something told her that the persistence in intimidation came not from the petulance of jealousy, but rather from cool sordid calculation: from that moment she ceased to be afraid of, or for, Vincent Flemyng. She felt towards him exactly as she would have felt in the presence of some importunate creditor, whose claim could not conveniently be settled on the spot: if she had blenched before such, she would not have been her father's daughter.

But a politic instinct made Mrs Charteris droop her eyes from their steadfast gaze, and pass her filmy kerchief lightly over her lips, before she spoke: otherwise, the expression of one or the other must surely have belied the careless gaiety of her words.

"I fancied you would have been more thoughtful when you could guess at my wishes so well. But you will set me right with myself sooner or later; I am not afraid. It is so much pleasanter to trust; and easier too, now. For you will very soon cease to trouble yourself about me or mine. Poor me! Didn't I tell you how it would be? It is cruel to chain you here, when you are wanting to be elsewhere; and—wanted—I dare say. You needn't look penitent: it is the way of the world; and there are plenty more sinners to keep you in countenance. Go and prosper."

Flemyng was, constitutionally, unapt to betray emotion by any change of colour; but the veriest novice could not have blushed more palpably than he did, as his glance followed Marion's towards the remote corner, where a select circle was already beginning to form round Flora Dorrillon. And then his brow lowered sullenly; for on the chair nearest to the lady's right hand lounged the man whom Vincent honoured with his special hate. It was some comfort to mark that the conversation, over yonder, seemed general, and not particularly interesting to any one concerned; the listlessness was heavy on Ranksborough's face; and Flora was fluttering her fan slowly and monotonously, like one whose attention is only mechanically engaged.

The looker-on need not have disquieted himself, had he been aware of all the truth. They were very old friends—those two; and knew each other too thoroughly ever to have been more. Ranksborough liked to take his coffee in the immediate vicinity of a handsome woman, just as he liked to have a master-piece of Etty's confronting him in his own dining-room; and Flora valued her artillery of fascination far too highly to waste it in blank-cartridge practice.

But that one glimpse of the state of things over against him utterly upset all Flemyng's powers of dissimulation and self-control; though neither were of a mean order. A nervous irritation possessed him; making it intolerable to stay where he

was: the utmost that he could do was to gather his moral forces together, so as to beat an orderly retreat. In this he succeeded not ill.

"I accept the dismissal," he whispered; bowing his head with a mock humility. "If I were to argue with you now, it would take up too much of the time that belongs to others: I had nearly forgotten that you are hostess here. But I'll try and convince you whenever you have leisure to listen."

And so Vincent sauntered slowly away. If you have ever watched a carrier-pigeon circling round and round, at starting, before she makes her point, you will have a fair idea of the meanderings that saved appearances, and yet brought him in brief space to Lady Dorrillon's side.

Marion Charteris drew a long sigh, rather of impatient weariness than of regret, as she turned to Lady Greystoke.

"How *gauche* you must think me," she said. "But it will not happen again. I was, really, obliged to speak seriously to Mr Flemyng. He borrowed some photographs of mine in Rome; and I have never been able to get them back. It makes a dreadful blank in my book; and, I believe, he only keeps them to tease me. It is so very tiresome of him."

The elder dame glanced at the speaker with her keen black eyes—still bright and satirical as ever; and her smile was full of meaning.

"Don't apologize, dear. I think you were quite right to speak seriously, under the circumstances. Only, I should have filled up the blank in my—book, long ago. It is very tiresome of Mr Flemyng, though. But pages are apt to be tiresome when they out-grow pagehood: and then—there is but one way with them, in any well-ordered household."

"But one way, indeed," Marion answered, with a light laugh. Just then other guests gathered round her; and she was the pleasantest of hostesses once more.

Notwithstanding the fascination that overbore him, and the encouragement of a quick meaning smile as he drew near, Flemyng betrayed no great haste or eagerness in joining the circle round Lady Dorrillon. For several minutes he was content to hover on the outskirts thereof; and did not come fairly to

the front till the chair on Flora's right hand was empty. Even in his animosities Vincent was not apt to forget the better part of valour; something told him that it would be advisable, for the present, to avoid a possibility of breaking a conversational lance with Ranksborough. Neither did the latter seem anxious to give such a chance: after finishing the last drop of his *chasse* very leisurely, he rose and lounged slowly away. Yet there was something in his manner that irritated Flemyng vaguely; to say nothing of a sort of amused intelligence that seemed to underlie the laziness of the great black eyes.

As Ranksborough departed, Flora's ample skirt expanded, in some mysterious fashion, till it half-shrouded the chair on which he had been sitting, and warned off intruders: equally mysteriously did it contract a few seconds later, when Vincent found himself accidentally in that especial corner; leaving a temptingly vacant seat.

Have you ever watched a real mistress of coquettish tactics manœuvre her drapery? The famous mantle, that put all the dames of Camelot to shame, save only Sir Caradoc's true wife, cannot compare with some modern *vertugadins* in capricious elasticity.

Anyhow, Vincent seemed to fall, quite naturally, into the post of honour; neither did any of the others seem inclined to begrudge it him. They all belonged to the class with whom an instinctive tact supplies the void of delicacy, should such be wanting: seeing that their fair chieftainness had a fancy for a *tête-à-tête*, they bowed, courteously, to the caprice, without any sign of impertinent intelligence; and so dropped off, one by one, leaving Flemyng at last alone in his great glory.

Once again they talked only on common-place topics—mutual friends, incidents of travel, and the like; yet none the less, in a brief hour's space, wild work was wrought in Flemyng's heart and brain.

There was rather a curious paper written some time ago, bearing on the connection between Sound and Colour; illustrated, if I remember rightly, chiefly from the experiences of the blind. If your musings had strayed in this direction, after listening for awhile to Flora Dorrillon, there would surely have risen before

your mind's eye visions of deep gorgeous crimson, or imperial purple. And through all the soft richness of those tones there thrilled a subtle vibration strangely contagious; so that your own voice began to tremble long before you were aware that you had hearkened to her—not harmlessly

When the party broke up for the night, Vincent went to his room to doff his evening armour, and to don loose raiment fit for the *tabagie*. But this purpose seemed forgotten as soon as the door of his own chamber closed behind him; for he sat down in the nearest arm-chair; and, in three minutes, was staring into the embers, evidently in a reverie not lightly to be broken. Nor was it broken till it was too late to think of joining the smokers below, even if he had felt in cue for their society. The least astute bystander would have realized the truth which, perchance, Vincent did not disguise from himself—he was fairly bewitched. Bewitched.

It is a pretty word enough to write; and when uttered by a pair of rose-bud lips is scarcely less effective than Prunes or Prism. Do you know what it means, sometimes?

It means that a mind has become suddenly warped and marred, as a body might be by a palsy-stroke; so that the plainest precepts of laws, divine or human, seem weary lessons, learnt by rote long ago, and not worth the remembering: it means that a man would stab his best friend in the back to win one of the witch's smiles; and rob an altar to buy gewgaws for a white neck or rounded arms; and trail his family honour in the mud, like a thread-bare cloak, to keep a wanton's slipper unsoiled. And in the symptoms of the malady there is a terrible sameness. When it has fairly taken hold, wisdom and folly, courage and cowardice, virtue and vice, are all as one. The keen eyes that could pierce even the twilight of Hades could see little difference in the swine wallowing in Circe's sty.

CHAPTER XXV

UNDER A CLOUD.

THE smoking-room at Charteris Royal was a fair specimen of its class—large, airy, and lofty; sufficiently, not desolately, distant from the centre of the house. It had been the justice-chamber in former times; and had only of late years been converted to its present uses; for the last squire had lived and died a rabid Anti-Nicotian. His son, inheriting many of his prejudices, was yet wiser in his generation. Ill fares it, surely, with the host who shall refuse to make concession to the spirit of his age. It would be easier, and almost less cruel to debar a thirsting hart from the water-brooks, than to stint certain men in their tobacco after a certain hour of the night. I only know one great house, the despot of which is, in this respect, unrelenting. There—after first casting lots to settle who shall be the self-devoted; for the penalty in case of discovery is perpetual banishment—the smokers muster regularly in some bachelor's sleeping-chamber, and hide their oppressed heads in clouds of their own compelling.

But, with all his stiff old-fashioned ways, John Charteris was not ill-natured or inconsiderate towards his guests. He had taken some trouble about the furnishing and adornment of the *tabagie*: there were comfortable arm-chairs enough to make an imposing circle round the wide hearth, and the walls were nearly hidden with such pictures (chiefly of a sporting character) as were deemed unworthy of a place in the saloons or galleries. Though he never touched tobacco alone, he rarely failed to appear in the smoking-room for a quarter of an hour or so; during which time he would puff slowly and solemnly at an extraordinarily small and pale cigar; evidently looking on himself in the light of a W. M. opening a Lodge with all due formalities. But a certain reticence and reserve hung about the conclave whilst he abode there; the liveliest imagination could scarcely manage a fetter-dance in his presence, and a sense of relief and freedom visibly pervaded the party, when—with a few muttered words of

excuse, which nobody was expected to answer—he departed to his blameless couch and heavy slumbers.

There was not a large meet on that especial night; only some half-dozen drew their chairs in closer to the fire, as the baized inner door swung to behind John Charteris. Amongst these were Bertie Grenvil, Cecil Castlemaine, and Denzil Ranksborough.

The three—sitting, as it chanced, side by side—make rather a picturesque group, from the very contrast of colouring.

The Cherub is a ‘thing of beauty’ indeed, in rich maroon velvet, brodered down every seam with glittering arabesques; his small, shapely feet cased in slippers to match, bearing his monogram in heavy raised gold. Ranksborough is in velvet, too, blue-black as his own hair and eyes, unrelieved by a single thread or stitch of lighter colour; the effect is good, albeit intensely sombre; he might have stepped out of the frame of a picture painted in Venice ten-score years ago. Beyond him is Castlemaine; scarcely less magnificent than the Cherub, but in a very different style. With the present curt fashion of lounging attire Cecil will have nought to do; his portly figure, on these occasions, is ever draped in an ample dressing-robe, such as only Eastern looms can weave, wherein hues, gorgeous in themselves, are so deeply blended that they produce but a softened harmony. On the opposite side of the hearth is De Visme, in sad-coloured raiment, perhaps more costly than that of the other three; for that russet fabric is worth more than its weight in gold, even in the shadow of Kashmerian hills. The remaining personages are merely ‘sitting gentlemen,’ with whom the chronicler has no concern.

The talk so far is neither animated nor well sustained; a sort of patchwork of disjointed sentences, dropped in the careless listless fashion of men who, having started no subject of general or special interest, are rather wrapt up in the nice conduct of their first cigar. At last said Castlemaine—

“Does anybody know anything of the man who came just before dinner? Flemyng’s his name, I fancy. There’s no harm in talking of the devil; for it’s clear we are not to be honoured with his company to-night.”

Now the wary old stager happened to have heard more about

the sayings and doings in Rome than any one else then present : but he kept his stores of knowledge exceedingly dark ; no buzz or hum betrayed the purpose of the busy social bee, as he went about his noiseless labours,

Gathering honey all the day
From every opening flower—

he had acquired the knack of making the said flowers expand and render up their riches, whether they would or no. Moreover his habitual prudence was more than ever on its guard under the roof-tree of Charteris Royal, and in the presence of Ranksborough ; about whose feelings towards his fair hostess Cecil had already formed his own opinion ; so that his cue evidently was to know nothing ; and even to be shadowy as to the new comer's name.

It chanced that either none present were well 'posted' in the state of affairs, or instinctive delicacy kept them silent ; for some seconds it looked as if the query would remain unanswered. At last, Bertie Grenvil said carelessly, never stirring the cigarette betwixt his lips—

"Didn't I hear something about him the spring before last ? I'm sure I did. And it had something to do with—"

He threw his head backwards and upwards, significantly : every man in the room guessed at once to whom he alluded. Ranksborough's marble face changed not a whit ; but his black brows were drawn together ever so slightly. The subject was not new to him—be sure, Marion had made her case good in that quarter long ago—but he did not relish hearing it discussed just then. That faint sign of annoyance did not escape De Visme's prudent eyes, and he came readily to the rescue : when it was worth his while he could turn the course of a disagreeable or awkward remark, and as boldly and adroitly as a *banderillo* drawing off the charge of a Murcian bull.

"'No scandal about Queen Elizabeth, I hope,'—least of all foreign-made scandal. And your version of it is wrong, Grenvil ; or much exaggerated. I^a heard something about it, too, from Archdale, who was in Rome at the time. A handsome woman out there, all alone, is bound to have some special lord or gentle-

man-in-waiting. I think Mrs Charteris showed very good taste in choosing a raw 'clerk of Oxenford' and an old family-friend."

Castlemaine gave a little nod of approbation and encouragement.

"That's the way to take it," he said. "No woman, who knows how to live, ought to be compromised by such a 'follower.' I never saw conceit and fretfulness more plainly written on any face: he must be in a chronic state of bristling; and conceive, what a nuisance that must be! I daresay he was a very useful *cicerone*. I do remember something about him now. Usedn't he to play at painting?"

"Perhaps you're both right, and I'm wrong, as I generally am," Bertie answered, with utter indifference. "Anyhow, it don't matter: whatever was, is over; that's clear. He had no eyes or ears to-night for any one but the Dorrillon. What form that is! He was only introduced to her about two hours ago—I took the trouble to ascertain that—and he's knocked hopelessly out of time already."

Lionel Hardress broke in here; his voice was so unnaturally harsh and deep for his age and physique, that it almost startled you; and his hard laugh was not pleasant to hear.

"How do you know they're not both in the same stable?" he said. "I'll lay odds on it, myself. I watched Mrs Charteris's face—for want of something better to do—all the while the other was making play. She was looking as pleasant as you please; just as a man would look who has squared everything in the race, so that they're all running for his money. There's some plant up; you see if there isn't."

Denzil Ranksborough's eyes rested on the speaker with little favour, yet with a languid curiosity; they rested so long that Hardress, who was not easily disconcerted, waxed uneasy under their gaze.

"What the d—l are you thinking of?" he asked, in some heat.

The other took his cigar from between his lips, and watched the thin blue smoke-coils expanding for some seconds before he made answer—very slowly.

"I was thinking—what a wonderful 'tout' was spoiled, when you were born to twelve thousand a year."

No one stood on delicacy with Hardress, whose hide was known to be proof against any ordinary home-thrust ; so that the laugh was general. And the boy laughed himself, after a moment's hesitation and one spiteful glance at Ranksborough. Indeed, it is possible that he more than half relished the equivocal compliment. His chief ambition was to be considered a 'real sharp hand;' and occasionally to be mistaken for his own trainer—not Castlemaine, *bien entendu*, but an astute professional, noted for unscrupulousness beyond his fellows. In both of these objects—the last especially—he had succeeded tolerably well : in dress, manner, tone, and talk, master and man were a pair of Syracusan Brothers ; and though there was a score of years between them, comparative strangers were sometimes puzzled, even after having a fair look at the old, old face on the young shoulders. So Lionel was in nowise disconcerted : he was used to being mocked at for his peculiarities, and not unfrequently had the laugh on his side before all was done : perhaps, though, his tone was a trifle more sulky than usual as he answered,

"I'm very well off as I am ; and I don't want to change. But you're pretty right, my lord. There's not many games I'm not 'fly' to, if I once begin to watch 'em."

With such a party as were there assembled very scant encouragement is needed to turn the talk into a dilution of Ruff's Guide. So it happened now ; and in this groove the conversation flowed on or stagnated, till the others had all dropped off, one by one, leaving Castlemaine and Grenvil alone.

One of the peculiarities in Cecil's organization was his faculty of dispensing with any approach to beauty-sleep. If

The best of all ways to lengthen our days
Is to borrow a few hours from the night—

his debt must have rolled up by this time into something fabulous. Indeed the habit had become so engrained into his nature, that had his head been laid on a pillow much before 2 A.M., it would probably have tossed about restlessly till daybreak ; as it was, he slept usually the sleep of the just, and rose late ; seldom indulging the world with his countenance much before noon. He was a steady, without being an inveterate smoker ;

though his cigar was seldom extinct, his solemn deliberate puffs made tobacco go a very long way. At many thousand late vigils—not to say orgies—had that fine benignant face of his assisted; and yet there was hardly a wrinkle on his smooth forehead, nor on his cheeks, whereon lingered still a faint tinge of peach-bloom; and he still carried his hoary head as gallantly erect as if it had been a ‘crown of glory.’

The Cherub, too, would keep terribly late hours, by fits and starts—it was part of his system of burning life’s candle at both ends, and melting it in the middle to boot: on this particular evening he seemed in no sort of humour for bed, and would probably have lighted a fresh cigar, even if he had not liked his company

But Castlemaine and he were great allies. The former, as you are aware, stood a good deal on his dignity, and would abide no undue familiarity, especially from his juniors; but he was always ‘Cis’ to Bertie Grenvil. He liked the reckless handsome boy—with his gentle winning ways, and wild dare-devilry in play and love—either from sympathy or from memory of what he himself had been, well enough, to have helped him out of one or two serious scrapes, with sound advice and yet more substantial aid. And the attraction was decidedly mutual,—they generally had a little confidential chat when they found themselves alone together.

So after a brief silence Castlemaine began to speak, in his wonted deliberate fashion; yet there was a slight tinge of impatience in his gesture, as he shook off the long white ash from his cigar fully a minute too soon.

“You heard what Hardress said. What do you think of it?”

“Yes, I heard,” Bertie answered. “It’s difficult *not* to hear that voice of his: I’m sure it was pitched by nature for the Ring. I haven’t thought much about it; but I’ve no doubt the ‘tout’ is right. He always reminds me of a child I saw in Ireland ages ago: a small bullet-headed boy with hardly any hair on his head to speak of; so little indeed, that I couldn’t help remarking it to his mother. ‘Indade then, yer honner,’ she said, ‘he’s as cunning as he is bald.’ And that’s about the mark with Hardress: he’ll spoil his eyes, if he don’t mind, with always looking so sharp into mill-stones. I shouldn’t wonder if he’s on the right scent

this time: perhaps, as he elegantly phrases it, 'they are both in the same stable.' But why on earth they should give themselves any trouble about Mr Flemyng; or why the Dorrillon should waste her best tackle on such a samlet, when a thread and bare hook would have done as well—is far beyond me. I'm deuced bad at working out problems; and never guessed a riddle since I was a baby."

The elder man leant a little forward in his chair; lowering his voice discreetly from mere force of habit: for he knew himself safe from listeners.

"It's simple enough, I fancy. I chanced to hear a good deal more about the goings on in Rome than you did perhaps, or than I chose to allow before the rest of them. I'm half sorry I mentioned the man's name; but I wanted to find out what they knew. De Visme has heard a good deal too, I'd swear; though he turned it off devilish well. There's no doubt about it; Mrs Charteris made a fool of herself out there—if nothing worse. It's no use shrugging your shoulders and lifting your eyebrows: it was bad taste, of course, for he carries 'cock-tail' in his face; but not a bit worse than I've met in my time; and so have you, in yours. But she saw her mistake long ago; and she *don't* see the pull of having him dangling about her here in England, and hampering her in her innocent amusements. I believe they are tolerably innocent; but she could no more exist without flirting than she could live on barley-bread and water. So she has got the Dorrillon to take him off her hands for ever and a day. Mr Flemyng had better make the most of John Charteris' '47 wine; he won't drink much more of it after this visit ends, you may take my word."

The Cherub whistled long and low.

"If that's the case, I wouldn't give much for his chances. It's about the neatest way of dropping a troublesome admirer down the *oubliettes* that I've heard of of late years: quite worthy of a high and well-born *Herzogin*. There's no fear of Flemyng coming to life again, when he once disappears down the trap. You didn't know Percy Arundel, perhaps? He was in my battalion. The evening he was introduced to Lady Dorrillon she carried on just in the same way as she did to-night.

Poor Perev ! He was as good a fellow as you ever met in those days ; and was engaged to as nice a girl as you ever saw. I don't know what's become of *her* ; but I met *him* last summer in Brussels, looking so utterly disreputable that I almost shirked him. He went straight down-hill from that very night, without a check, at a killing pace too ; and he had twice the bone and breeding of this amateur artist."

After a pause Castlemaine spoke again.

"It's a curious age we live in, certainly. Here have we—not only you and I, but all the rest of them—been discussing the love-passages of two women, just as if it were a case of matrimony and honourable intentions, with both their husbands sleeping within three hundred feet of us. A queer state of things to prevail in the most moral country in Europe."

"If they're sleeping, it don't so much matter," Bertie said, philosophically. "But I'm afraid poor old Sir Marmaduke has restless nights, as a rule. He's looking terribly worn and broken of late. I'm rather glad that I've had no share in thinning his grey hairs."

"They do you great credit—both your compassion and your continence," the other retorted, with some irritation. "It's a pity you don't bestow the one and practise the other a little oftener. You're right, though. I've known Marmaduke Dorrillon these thirty years : there never was a finer specimen of the Ancient Régime till he married that ——" All Cecil's courtesy towards the sex scarcely kept back the bitter word that was on his lips : he just swallowed it, however, and went on. "There's one pleasant house spoilt for all convivial purposes ; and there would be another here, if Ranksborough could have his way. Not that he will, I think ; but the intention's the same. Because an explosion only happens once in twenty times, that don't make it safer to play with gunpowder. You're just as bad, one as the other : I never pity you when you come to grief. Why on earth can't you let the wives do their duty, without trying to spoil them for general society ? The *chasse aux mariées* was never meant to be naturalized on this side of the Channel."

"It's 'diamond cut diamond' at the worst," the Cherub

said. "The friskiest matron of them all can take pretty good care of herself, if she really wants to go straight. And their hearts are tough enough—tougher than girls' hearts at all events."

He spoke coolly and indifferently; but with the last words his face darkened. He had begun thinking of the beautiful brown eyes that had looked up into his own so trustfully that night; and of the low sweet voice that had faltered so often in its timid replies; and of the tiny hand that trembled so in his clasp whilst he bade Minnie Carrington 'good-night.' What a dear honest little thing she was! And what business had he to fool her for his amusement, when he had no more chance of marrying her than if she had been of the blood-royal? The Cherub, in his irreverence, utterly ignored the damsel's betrothed, though he was perfectly aware of the engagement; but he could not ignore his own substantial fetters; and they were not only financial embarrassments that hampered him. In the anathema, muttered under his breath, Philistines were included no less than Hebrews; and it lighted not alone on bearded usurers. More unrelenting than the worst of these sometimes is Delilah—exactng her unwritten bond to the uttermost farthing.

For some minutes the two smoked on in silence: Bertie roused himself first from his reverie.

"By the way, Cis, I don't remember ever having come across your name in any of these affairs. It might have been before my time, to be sure; yet, I fancy, I should have heard of it. If you kept clear, it wasn't from lack of opportunity, I dare swear."

The elder man looked keenly, and somewhat grimly, at the speaker, as if suspecting covert taunt or banter: but Grenvil had evidently made the remark in perfect good faith and simplicity.

"No: you never heard of it," Cecil said, at last; "and never were likely to. I got my lesson before you were born, and it has lasted me my life. I haven't forgotten it yet, though temptation has been over for me this many a year. I've half a

mind to tell you how it happened; not that it will do you a particle of good.—Listen, any way.

“When I was a little older than you I had a friend; such as you often find in books, but right seldom in life. I don’t mean a man in the same set with yourself; with the same haunts and tastes; with whom you lounge, or drink, or smoke, six nights out of every seven; a man who, perhaps, would lend you his name, or even money, if he could spare it and thought you would pay him back some day. I mean a real staunch friend; who would back you through thick and thin, through storm and sunshine, better than most brothers—better, for instance, than mine. I had such an one then—indeed I had—though it seems hard to believe it now; such luck only happens to any man once. We never dreamt of such trash as exchanging promises, or making amicable demonstrations; but we *knew* one another—or thought we did—that was enough. Well—after a while Fred married. I only saw his wife twice before the wedding, where I was best-man. I didn’t think much of her at first: she had a pretty face, but a weak one, in spite of a pair of great dark eyes, and a childish caressing manner. I was travelling for the next twelve months, and hardly saw them; but I went to stay at Fred’s place directly I came back to England; and found myself just as much at home there as ever. There—I’m not going through the whole story; it would only bore you, and it sickens me to think of it. I soon got so familiar, as to call her by her pet name quite naturally, even before strangers. Before long she began to play off her coquetries on me;—for practice, I believe, at first, or for fun; so it went on till, somehow, I found myself netted. Of course, I ought to have gone far away, and told Fred the reason, taking all blame on myself; or done—anything but what I did. I know that well enough now; and have known it these thirty years. But I stayed on and got deeper into the mire daily. On my honour, the idea of deliberate treachery or of real harm—what you would call harm—never entered my mind; nor, I do think, into hers. But she liked philandering dearly; besides, her brain was turned with French novels, till nothing

would satisfy her but playing the *Marquise*: and I—I was a hot-brained, hot-blooded idiot. When I did go away, she made me promise, dead against my will, to write to her once; swearing by everything that was sacred that she would burn the letter as soon as she had read it. She hadn't the chance of breaking her word; for that letter came, by an accident, by the wrong post and when she was out. Fred opened it—knowing my handwriting—to see if there was anything to answer by return: it was the first of his wife's seals he had ever broken. There was nothing actually criminal in those cursed four pages—there couldn't be; but there was enough of wicked fooling to make Fred and me strangers till death. Till death. That wasn't so very long either. In the second spring after these things happened, he injured his spine in a terrible fall. Poor Fred! he was the best heavy-weight I ever knew: you should have seen him steer a young one over his own stiff country. He lingered for a fortnight or more. I wrote and begged to see him once—if only for five minutes—just to shake hands, and say farewell. Would you believe it? *she* stopped my letter. She owned, afterwards, to the woman who told it me, 'that she was afraid I might make more mischief between her husband and herself:' in plain words—she was afraid I should tell tales; and try to clear myself at her expense. Till then, I had taken my full share of the blame. I didn't stop to inquire whether I had been tempter or tempted: I only thought it hard that, for such a gew-gaw, I should have cast away a true diamond. But that last act of hers made us more than even: I never have forgiven it; and never will. Almost the last words Fred spoke were—

“‘Poor old Cis! I'm sorry he didn't come to say good-bye: I didn't like to ask him; but he must have known he wouldn't have been turned away.’

“And the day before he died he sent me a few lines, that reached me just too late: even I could hardly read them—he used to write such a bold firm hand, too!—but I've had them by heart these many years. If I have ever since been tempted to say words to a wife that I should not like her husband to overhear, I had only to remember the first line of Fred's last

note; and the temptation was over. Such words, at least, I never have spoken—as I hope for God's mercy ”

His voice had grown hoarse and husky long before he ended ; and a great change had come over figure not less than face, making both seem strangely shrunk and aged. It was hard to recognize the portly debonair elder and cheery boon-companion of a few minutes before, in the haggard and bowed old man, sitting there, gazing blankly into the fire.

Grenvil had no answer ready on the instant ; before he could frame one Castlemaine had lighted his candle and departed abruptly ; muttering something about it “ being long past canonical hours : ” so Bertie was left to his meditations.

Now if the concentrated eloquence of all the preachers in England—from the Right Reverend Bishop of Petroleum, down to the Ir-reverend Spurgeon—could have been poured out on the Cherub's head, in all probability that graceless reprobate would have dozed peacefully under the thunder ; and afterwards gone on his way, utterly unheeding and unedified. But the story he had just heard—an ordinary one enough, by no means graphically told—impressed him more than he chose to own. The battered old worldling, who had never in his life dreamt of pointing a moral, had preached a sermon unawares. It is not the first time that a lay archer has sent a chance arrow home, when all clerical quivers might have been emptied in vain.

During the few minutes that he sate musing alone, Bertie, it is to be feared, did not indulge in any definite visions as to a changed Future : but he felt equal to abstaining from harm for the present, even if he could work out no positive good, and if the amendment should prove only temporary. He swore to himself that—come what would—he would trifle no more with sweet Minnie Carrington's heart. So—carrying with him the rare burden of a good resolve which he was destined to keep—the Cherub betook himself soberly to his slumbers.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MINE—WHATEVER HAPPENS.

IN this tale of ours there are threads not only of soft gay silk, but of dark rough wool: these last must needs be gathered up sometimes to keep the woof even. So let us turn our faces towards Mote once more.

The state of things there was anything but satisfactory. The social *cordon* drawn round the precincts of Bessie Maskelyne's home was still rigidly maintained: the rare civilities of the county were dealt out in niggard formal fashion, with as many sanitary precautions as are used with coin passing through quarantine. You may make almost any animal savage with confinement; and 'confinement' was hardly too strong a word to apply to Mrs Maskelyne's manner of life at this period.

The few members of the clergy and squirearchy who came to her set dinner-parties did not cheer her a whit: they ate and drank plentifully, but evidently under constraint, and resolutely declined to be amused or amusing. It was worse still when she was alone in the drawing-room with their wives and daughters: these worthy dames and damsels used to break themselves up into small detached knots and carry on whispered converse amongst themselves, which converse invariably ceased—not without signs of trepidation—as soon as the mistress of the house drew near. Occasionally, two or three soldiers from Torrcaster came over to shoot, dine, and sleep; but the visits of these military angels were few and far between; and they, too, seemed rather on their guard with their handsome hostess; treating her with a studied ceremony and distant courtesy. They meant well; but—had they been insolently familiar—they could not have marked more plainly their sense of the fact, that they were consorting with a woman not of their own order.

It was no wonder that Bessie's temper—never of the mildest—should chafe under the monotony and comparative solitude that she was forced to endure. And Brian, with the best in-

tentions, could help her but little. He had never sufficiently recovered from the shock of his mother's death to be quite his old self again: a morbid disinclination for society grew on him daily; and daily he seemed less able or willing to make head against the difficulties that beset him, indirectly, through his fair wife: he took to sitting a good deal alone, in those rooms of which he still kept the key; and at such times it was understood that none of the household were to approach him unsummoned. He was always ready to attend Bessie in her long 'constitutionals' on horseback, or to drive her if she felt so inclined: but the shadow of her discontent fell heavily over Brian; they would ride, sometimes, rapidly for miles, scarcely exchanging a dozen words, and these only of trivial import. Yet did he not love her a whit the less; or slacken in his tender care, that her every whim and fancy should be provided for: indeed it was almost painful to see his nervous anxiety to smooth away anything that could possibly be a stone of offence to the temper that was only too prone to stumble.

At last, in sheer despair of seeing things improve as they stood, Brian proposed a year's travel on the Continent. Bessie seemed to catch at the idea quite eagerly at first: but, two mornings after it had been mooted—they had been discussing routes and plans till late on the previous evening—she suddenly professed herself unwilling to move just at present: alleging as an excuse her father's health, which, indeed, was breaking rather fast; but concerning which, till that moment, Bessie had betrayed a very temperate solicitude.

Mr Standen was present at this sudden parade of filial affection; and his face was quite a study. Bewilderment, a faint gleam of intelligence, a decided sense of the ridiculous, and a certain awe of the imperious speaker, were all mingled there.

"You're a good girl, Bessie," he said, with a cunning twinkle in his watery eyes; "a very good girl—to think so much of your poor father. He won't hamper you much longer, I fancy, either. But don't you mind me. I'll do well enough, if you'll let me take care of the place for you while you're gone, in my own rooms up there. I don't think I'm strong enough to be turned adrift, just now. Your housekeeper said, only last week,

that she wouldn't know I was here for all the trouble I gave: she did, indeed, Mr Maskelyne."

The cunning look had faded from his face as he whined out the last words; blinking the while piteously at his son-in-law, whom he always accosted, now, with a timid ceremonious observance. Brian had begun to compassionate the unhappy old creature a good deal of late; and—though he could not manage a sustained conversation—had a kind or courteous word for the other whenever they chanced to be together. But he was fairly taken aback by this sudden outbreak of Bessie's piety; and stood looking from father to daughter in a sort of puzzled way, till he felt himself bound, in humanity, to reassure the former.

"Don't think of that, Mr Standen. You're more than welcome to your quarters here, as long as you like to keep them. They're almost a hermitage, as you use them, I'm sorry to say. But I don't quite understand. You're not worse than usual this morning, I trust? And Bessie seemed so keen about the travelling last night. She knows best, of course. I shouldn't think of taking her away against her will."

Brian checked himself before the last sentence, which was spoken with an abrupt change of manner; for he had caught a quick warning sign from his wife, intimating that he had better say no more at present, but wait for an explanation.

When they were alone Bessie did explain, that she had spoken that morning with the servant whose special duty it was to attend on her father, and had learnt enough from him of Mr Standen's state of mind and body to make her loth to leave home yet awhile. With this Brian was fain to be content; but had the excuse been less plausible he would hardly have cavilled or questioned: such was not his way. No man ever carried out, with more chivalrous abandonment, the grand old principle of—

Trust me all in all,
Or trust me not at all.

About a week later, as they were riding together, Bessie opened a fresh battery, still harping on her father.

"Brian; I wish you'd let me ask my cousin here for a few

days. Papa's affairs are in the most dreadful muddle, as I happen to know; and Kit is the only man alive who can set them straight. Poor Kit! I'm afraid you never liked him. But you won't mind his coming here for a short visit?"

Maskelyne's countenance fell. There were turns of expression every now and then issuing from his wife's rosy lips, which grated disagreeably on his delicate ears; but, of all others, he hated that familiar shortening of her cousin's Christian name.

"You're thoroughly right, Bessie," he said, after rather an awkward pause. "I never did like Mr Daventry, and I never shall; and I like the set he lives in still less."

Bessie had been in an unusually gracious humour all that morning; but the storm-cloud came over her face now, swift and dark.

"He won't bring his set here with him," she said, under her breath.

"He'll bring their manners and customs, though"—Brian retorted, more sharply than he had often spoken. "And they don't improve on acquaintance: at least, I find it so."

Mrs Maskelyne reined in her fretting horse to a steady foot's-pace with a firm skilful hand; but she was less successful in curbing her own temper: it would show itself, despite the forced levity of her tone.

"Look here, Brian," she said. "It's just as well to be straightforward, and not to play at cross-purposes. We were not swells when you first knew us—it's no use biting your lip; I mean to talk in my own way, for once—and we didn't pretend to be better than we were; there was no sham about it. You took me with all my faults—pedigree included. It's very good of you to shelter my poor old father; but—mind—I never asked him here. And I've never coaxed you to be civil to a single other friend or relation of mine. But, if you think I'm going to cut Kit Daventry, whom I've known from a child, and who has helped me and mine when we were hard set for daily bread; why—you're very nearly as much mistaken as a man can be."

She certainly looked marvellously handsome at that moment;

with her soft cheek flushed, not unbecomingly; and her great sapphire eyes gleaming; and her ripe scarlet lip all a-tremble.

There are few occasions in this life of ours when we should 'do well to be angry, even unto death.' This was one of them. It had been better for Brian Maskelyne to have spoken ever so harshly or tyrannically, than to have relented as he did then. If he had set his foot down firmly there, he would not have avoided much present and future misery, but he might possibly have staved off dishonour.

Even from the imperfect sketch of his character that has been set before you, you will have realized the lack of moral firmness that caused many of his strongest impulses to come to nought. The spell of his wife's rare beauty held him now—as it had held him before—helplessly fascinated: he was moved, too, with a certain admiration, at seeing her stand forward so boldly to do battle for the absent; he could hardly find it in his heart to blame her, though the absent was so unworthy of her championship. Moreover, he could not but remember how little countenance and encouragement Bessie had met with from the society into which he had tried to force her; in spite of all that he could do, her life must be very dull at times: that made it seem harder that she should be cut off from her own people. Besides all this, he despised Daventry so heartily that he could not, for shame, make him the subject of a grave conjugal quarrel. There is but one end, as a rule, when a man admits the possibility of surrender: so, as might be expected, after a few seconds of reflection Brian hung out the flag of truce.

"You take it much too seriously, Bessie. I don't get on well with your cousin, certainly. But he's not a bit more distasteful to me than half-a-dozen men who dine here may be to you. If you want me to take a lasting aversion to him you'll go on frowning for two minutes longer. Ask him by all means; and pray let him stay as long as it suits his convenience. Now, let the sunshine come back again, darling: I'm beginning to shiver in the shade."

A hard and coarse nature was Bessie Maskelyne's; made harder and coarser by her evil training; but it was not bad to the very core.

She would scarcely have been proof against the influence of her husband's manner, even if it had not been her policy to be gracious when she had thoroughly got her own way. Her laugh rang out musically through the keen clear air, as she smote Brian lightly on the shoulder with the jewelled toy in her whip-hand.

"It's all your fault, you cross old thing! I believe you like to see me in a pet sometimes. Well—we'll say no more about it: it's so tiresome to quarrel about trifles. Let us have a good stretching gallop now. There's a long mile of turf before us; and Challenger is pulling my arms off to-day."

The Lawyer arrived in due course. He was evidently on his best behaviour; his manner was much chastened and subdued; and he answered Brian's not very cordial greeting, with an attempt at formal courtesy strangely different from his wonted free-and-easy style of address. It is possible he may have received a private hint from Bessie; but it is more likely that his uncle's sensations affected Daventry in a lesser degree. Even to him, the master of Mote, in his own house, was another personage from the modest lodger at No. 3, Trasteverine Terrace. For the first week of his stay he was virtually inoffensive; spending the greater part of his mornings in Mr Standen's rooms (to which conferences Bessie was not unfrequently summoned), and strolling out with his gun after rabbits or ducks in the afternoon; so that he and Brian scarcely met before dinner; at which meal Daventry seemed disposed to enjoy himself thoroughly. But he was moderate in his public drinking; though the butler could have told some curious tales of strong liquors consumed in the smoking-room, and upstairs to boot.

During that week two of the soldiers from Torrcaster came over to dine and sleep; Daddy Goring, and a late-joined cornet—a great acquisition to the corps; for he was very handsome, exceedingly wealthy, and *too* wicked for his years.

Now the Princess's Own were rather a horsey regiment: without being slaves of the Ring, or gambling desperately, they wagered pretty freely on most important events; and, if the distance was anywise practicable, their drag was never missed

at a race meeting. Neither Goring nor Armytage (that was the boy's name) was sufficiently versed in turf-chronicles to be familiar with Daventry's antecedents, though they might have heard his name repeatedly. So they listened to his after-dinner talk with much satisfaction; purposing to make their profit therefrom, or at least to come out strong before their less learned comrades. It is hardly necessary to observe that the Lawyer did not part with one iota of really good information; but he made his remarks sound confidential, which did quite as well.

So it came to pass that, before they parted next morning, Goring had invited him to dine on the following day.

The mess of the Princess's Own was exceptionally good: you might feed there for a fortnight together, and never know when it was guest-night, unless you augured it from the presence of the band, or a little extra pomp of plate: not one detail of table-arrangement would have been neglected had Lucullus, in the absence of all his comrades, been forced to sup with himself, as officer of the day.

And the credit of all this was mainly due to Daddy Goring. From the moment that he came on the mess-committee he began to work at convivial economy with the energy and perseverance that is only bestowed on a labour of love; drilling the waiters more diligently than he even drilled his troop; and making the ears of butler and cook to tingle. A pleasant sight was that portly *arbiter bibendi*; beaming on the fruits of his pains from the presidential chair, which none other, in his presence, thought of usurping; and listening with twinkling eyes to the approving comments of a stranger, on a peculiarly successful *salmi*, or a beaker of 'dry,' iced to a turn.

It was not a guest-night when Daventry dined there; and only two civilians besides himself were present, neither of whom he had met before: so he took his place at the president's right hand with agreeable anticipations—he was a great epicure in his way—and no sort of misgivings. The Colonel was absent; and the Major, senior officer.

Turnbull had been pursuing that day, and had got home late, after one of the long tedious hunting-runs peculiar to that

country, beginning and ending in woodland. The soup had been removed before he appeared in the mess-room. He was just taking his seat, near the centre of the table, with a few muttered words of apology, meant for the strangers present, when his eye lighted on Daventry.

The latter had never seen the Major before, to his knowledge. It was clear the ignorance was not mutual, for Turnbull started perceptibly; and for a moment seemed as though he would have spoken: he thought better of it apparently, and sat down. But all through dinner his brow was dark and lowering; and he was very taciturn, replying as briefly as possible to the queries about sport, &c., and never volunteering an observation. His comrades would scarcely have noticed this—for the Major was subject to fits of silence sometimes—had it not been evident that there was some positive cause for his discontent. The Princess's Own kept up the good old-fashioned custom of taking wine, at least with the strangers present: this Turnbull omitted to do now, for the first time within the memory of the scandalized mess-butler. Perhaps, indeed, the only soldier present who was not struck by Turnbull's strange demeanour was Daddy Goring; who was too immersed in his presidential duties to give any single individual more than a moment's attention: none of the three strangers chanced to be conversant with the particular point of mess etiquette.

So everything went on smoothly enough—if not very festively—till they adjourned into the ante-room; with the exception of the Major, who disappeared as soon as the move was made.

Whilst they were drinking their coffee, Goring and his guest began to talk about *écarté*. The subject seemed to come up quite accidentally, *apropos* of a certain doubtful point in the rules, which had lately been discussed in most of the sporting papers. Daventry took occasion to observe that the question ought never to have been settled in England, for the simple reason that no Englishman was really a master of the game: he himself, he said, had learnt all he knew from a French celebrity; and that was enough to give him an advantage over any ordinary Britisher.

Now, ever since the Daddy spent three weeks at Ostend, he

had rather fancied himself at *écarté*: indeed he did play very tolerably in a dashing hap-hazard sort of way; in camp and elsewhere, when they were brigaded with other regiments, he was always put forward as the champion of his corps; and had reaped no small profit and renown from some of these mild tournaments for merely nominal stakes: as was aforesaid, the Princess's Own didn't gamble. It was next to impossible to make him angry; but he was rather piqued now at the cool way in which Daventry ignored native talent. So he took up the glove readily enough, when the latter cast it down; proposing to play the best of eleven games "for something moderate; just enough to give one an interest in it; say—a tenner a game, and a pony on the rubber." These points were far beyond Goring's usual mark; but he could not bring himself to object, when the other fixed them in this matter-of-course fashion: so the table was set out, and the battle began.

The wily Lawyer knew right well that, when the sympathies of the 'gallery' set strongly on one side, the original stake at issue is the merest trifle, compared to the bye and outside bets that may be got on. He foresaw exactly what would happen now. The Daddy was such a favourite in the corps that very few, if any, of his comrades would have had the heart to wager against him, even if they had thought he was safe to lose. On the present occasion there were no such misgivings: the stranger's manner had rather prejudiced the company against him: they thought "he swaggered too much to be safe." So before a card was dealt the regimental money went on in earnest—Leo Armytage heading the plungers, with bets that doubled the stakes at once; and the civilians followed, more modestly, their entertainer's lead. Daventry found himself in the very position that he desired; facing all the others, with no one overlooking his hand.

The confidence of Goring's backers seemed to be justified: he won the first game in a walk; his adversary only scoring one point. They were too well-bred a lot to exult aloud over a stranger; but a low murmur of satisfaction ran through the gallery; and there was interchange of meaning smiles, whilst six to five on the rubber was proffered freely. Daventry

booked every bet as it was offered—they were not playing ‘money down’—with a muttered word of assent, or a careless nod: he was shuffling the cards in preparation for the next deal, when a quiet voice said,—

“I think we have had almost enough of this.”

The Lawyer looked up with a savage scowl; and met the stern grey eyes of old Alec Turnbull, who stood in the midst of the group gathered round Goring’s chair, with a face that might have been carved in granite.

“I’ve seen a good many pleasant rubbers on our guest-nights,” the Major went on—“and every one was satisfied with our regimental points. But in twenty years’ service I’ve never seen anything like this. See now, boys: if you want to gamble there are plenty of places to do it in, without turning your own ante-room into a ‘hell.’ No stranger has ever lost, or won, a heavy stake amongst us in my time; and never shall, if I can prevent it. I beg that this may be stopped at once.”

Goring paused for a minute in some perplexity. It wasn’t that he was much wrapped up in the match, now; indeed he felt rather sorry that it had ever been begun; but he did not like that a stranger should go away, and boast that he had cowed the Princess’s Own with high wagering.

“It’s only for once in a way, Major,” he said, apologetically.

“Once too often,” was the reply. “Look here, Daddy. I might speak as the senior officer present; perhaps I ought: but I don’t. I speak only as the friend, who was an old captain when you joined. As a personal favour to me—stop this at once.”

His hand fell on the other’s shoulder as he spoke; a hard heavy hand enough, but its touch was light and persuasive as a woman’s now. Goring rose up with his honest face all aglow.

“Don’t say another word, Major. It’s all over, if you take it in that way. I’d oblige you on a bigger thing than this, as you know right well. I’m very sorry, Mr Daventry: it was entirely my fault, for going against regimental rules. The other fellows only followed my lead. I’m glad I won the first game; though

it goes for nothing, of course. It makes it easier to draw stakes, when I've a little the best of it."

A little the best of it! The poor Daddy spoke in perfect simplicity and good faith. He had no idea of the talents of the man who sat over against him. I believe that adroit conjurer could have made the King appear, not alone in any given part of the pack, but in the frame over the mantel that held the hunting-card, or between the quarters of a fresh muffin, had he been so minded—

Such cunning, those who dwell on high
Have given to the Greek.

It was no wonder that the Lawyer's face should lower so savagely when he saw the assured booty slip from his grasp. It was as much as he could do to control his temper, even partially.

"A match is a match," he growled out at last. "Of course you must do as your commanding-officer bids you, here. But I'll play it out whenever you like elsewhere. At Mote, for instance."

With all his invincible good-humour, Goring had plenty of spirit and firmness: he was as little likely to be bullied into acting against his principles as the most cross-grained martinet in the service. He did not like his visitor's tone at all; and his own manner showed this plainly enough, as he made a cold and curt reply, to the effect "that he should make no appointments at Mote without consulting Mr Maskelyne; and that he considered the match postponed indefinitely; or rather—definitely at an end."

Daventry gnawed his lips in bitter anger; but he was cunning enough to see that he could not possibly make a decent quarrel out of the matter as it stood. So muttering—"Have it your own way: it's all one to me—;" with a hoarse taunting laugh, he wheeled the chair round again to the fire, and reverted to strong drink and tobacco.

Of course, a great awkwardness and constraint hung over the whole party. Turnbull made an effort to carry on a conversation with the other strangers—he had scarcely glanced at the Lawyer since their eyes first met—and in this he was

seconded by one or two of the captains; but the boys broke off into small groups, and spoke low amongst themselves; being evidently in much bewilderment. It was a great relief to every one when Daventry—after resisting a mild attempt or two on the part of Goring to draw him into turf talk—rose, and nodding a sulky adieu to all around, prepared to depart. It was a clear moonlight night; and he had already announced his intention of walking to his inn.

“I’ll go with you as far as the gate,” Goring said.

His conscience, exceedingly tender on the point of hospitality, was smiting him at that moment. He was sorry he had asked the man at all; but felt that the latter had been rather cavalierly treated.

As the other two went out, Turnbull threw on his cap, and followed; merely remarking to the man who sat next to him, “that he would be back directly; and they might have a quiet rubber after all.”

“There’s something devilish odd up to-night,” Leo Armytage murmured to his bosom friend. “I don’t half like the looks of the Daddy’s guest. I shouldn’t wonder if the Major has gone to have it out with him. What fun! I should so like to see old Alec give him pepper.”

Turnbull caught up the others before they had crossed the barrack-square; but he walked on, silently, by their side; never opening his lips till they had crossed the guard-room, and the gate had been opened. When they were fairly in the road without he addressed Goring—not in the familiar tone that he had used a while ago; but in a measured formal voice, as if he had been giving an order on parade.

“You are not, of course, aware whom you have been entertaining to-night? I hope this will teach you to be more cautious in the selection of your guests. I never heard the Princess’s Own accused of undue fastidiousness; but you must draw the line somewhere—for the regimental honour’s sake, if not for your own. I knew that person the instant I came into the mess-room. But he had eaten of our bread and salt, and my mouth was closed whilst he was within the barrack-gates. Do you consider a ring-man of indifferent repute, who has been more

than suspected of card-sharping, a fit associate for your brother officers? I know you better than to suppose that our opinions could differ here."

The Daddy was more thoroughly taken aback than he had ever been in his easy-going life. Before he could answer Daventry broke in—his face black and convulsed with passion,

"By G—d, I'll have the law of you for this! Do you dare to insinuate—"

The change in the Major's manner was absolutely startling, as he turned rudely on the speaker.

"I insinuate nothing. I state my belief, plainly, that you are no better than a common card-sharper and swindler. Don't snarl and show your teeth at me, you hound, if you want to get to kennel with whole bones. I tell you that I was at Chester, sleeping in the same inn, the year when you and your gang won three thousand of young Halkit, at the very game you were playing to-night. I heard all about your sham colonel (he was a broken army-surgeon); and the looking-glass; and the rest of it. You might have won the boy's money without hocussing his drink, and half-murdering him. And you want to practise your infernal sleight-of-hand tricks in the ante-room of the Princess's Own? Not—while I am to the fore. I went to my quarters to refresh my memory, from a diary, about that Chester business; but I got back in good time, you see."

"You shall prove your words," Daventry said huskily.

"Prove them?" Turnbull retorted in huge disdain. "I can't prove them, any more than Halkit could prove that he was robbed and poisoned. He don't scruple to express his opinion, though, about you and your confederates: neither do I. Proof? Look at his face, Daddy; and tell me if the proof isn't there—plain enough for any judge or jury?"

In truth, the Lawyer's features, unnaturally livid in the clear cold moonlight, told a tale easy to comprehend: conviction would not have been more complete if the working lips had confessed the villany. It was a face terrible to look upon, with its bitter malignity, and shrinking cowardice, and faint remnant of almost forgotten shame.

Goring did look as he was bidden; but he looked not long.

That good fellow could not abide the sight of punishment or misery—however well deserved—any more than he could watch the handling of a surgeon's knife.

"Yes; I see you're right, major," he muttered: "Right all through. I'm awfully sorry; it's all my fault. But for God's sake come away. I can't stand this."

Turnbull linked his arm in the speaker's, and followed him, not unwillingly, through the gates which still stood open. The dialogue had not been loud enough greatly to edify the stolid sentry, pacing backwards and forwards on his beat close by. And Daventry stood staring vacantly, long after the gate had closed behind them—for the first time in his life too stunned to blaspheme.

Now this episode does not seem materially to bear upon the main story. Yet it does so, more than would appear. For Daventry returned to Mote, on the following morning, in a frame of mind so thoroughly fiendish, that the working of mortal harm to *some one* became a matter of simple necessity. Thenceforward he was less guarded in his demeanour towards Mrs Maskelyne: even in her husband's presence he was not careful to abstain from a familiarity scarcely warranted by kinsmanship; and daily engrossed more of her society. It is true that there was some pretext for this; for they were generally together in her father's apartments: but the unhappy old drunkard, even if he chanced to be present, was no more of a check on the freedom of converse than an ugly piece of wax-work might have been.

With Brian, too, the Lawyer seemed inclined, of late, to stand on scant ceremony: he was sometimes almost aggressive, in his coarse sarcasms and insolent assumption of intellectual superiority. It is not to be presumed that he acted thus deliberately or of a forethought. But a savage vindictive devil was raging within the man, and would have vent whether he would or no, when not restrained by personal fear. It is the same with all the Carnivora, whether they go on two feet or four. I suppose, if the King-brute could once be thoroughly tamed, he would be safe enough so long as you treated him fairly; but the whip must be shaken everlastingly at the wolves and jackals.

The change in Daventry's manner towards her husband was so marked that Bessie took occasion to remonstrate thereon. The two were sitting late one afternoon in the deep bay-window of Mr Standen's presence-chamber, who was sleeping off his morning drink over the fire, in a stertorous doze. The Lawyer did not attempt to deny the imputation.

"I can't help it, Bess," he said in his harshest tones. "I do hate him so. Even when he's at the pains to be civil—that isn't often—he's a way of looking out of his great melancholy eyes that makes my nerves tingle. I feel sometimes as if I'd give anything to leave my mark on that smooth white forehead of his. I believe I shall, before long."

And, as he spoke, his glance went downward to his own left hand where sparkled the sharp bright diamond.

Now, with all her subjection to Daventry—a subjection dating from childhood—Mrs Maskelyne was not a whit afraid of him: he could coax her to do anything on earth: but even by him she was not to be cowed. She knew that something had gone wrong, though she guessed not at the truth (for of the scene in Torrecaster Barracks not a whisper had reached Mote, or was likely so to do); and she felt no more alarmed than if her cousin had shown signs of slight biliousness. It was a mere question of having proper remedies ready. So she shrugged her shoulders rather contemptuously, as she answered him.

"I do think your temper's getting worse every day, Kit. It's the old story, I suppose. You've been losing money, and want supplies. Well—it's just as easy to ask pleasantly as to make yourself disagreeable beforehand. You can have *that* at all events: there's no difficulty about it now."

There was a careless confidence in her manner that took the Lawyer rather by surprise, though he was careful not to betray this.

"You're wrong"—he said, still sullenly. "I'm not particularly hard up. But it's strange to hear you talk in that *millionnaire* style. Do you mean that you hold the purse-strings, and have blank cheques given you that you needn't account for?"

"I mean just this. When we married there were no settlements, of course. You know some were executed last year, and on a grand style too. But you *don't* know that since then Brian has settled £1500 a year on me—not pin-money, mind; but absolutely for my own use, with trustees and all the rest of it—for ever and ever. Poor boy! He never thinks of stint or counting where I'm concerned. I told him I couldn't spend a quarter of it; but he wouldn't listen. Now, perhaps you see why my own bank is good for a few hundreds when they're wanted."

Daventry's face was sullen no longer; but during the last few seconds it had grown very grave and thoughtful.

"And you never told me of this?" he muttered.

"I didn't know it would have any particular interest for you," she answered, with an indifference that was rather over-acted. "Besides, I fancied you'd have heard it from him."

A side motion of her head designated the sleeping figure by the fire.

"*He* tell one anything worth hearing?" the other retorted, with intense scorn. "Why, he'll forget his own name before he's much older. Well, I never believed, till now, that husbands and their money were so soon parted. So that £1500 a year is yours, for life, Bess—*whatever happens?*"

"Mine—whatever happens."

Her voice never faltered as she spoke; yet her cheek flushed painfully. She knew well enough what those last words meant.

A blacker-hearted scoundrel than Christopher Daventry has seldom tainted this upper air; and Bessie Maskelyne was worse a thousand-fold than many who have died at stake or block. Shame or remorse could deter that pair no more than the wave of crozier could avail, when—

L'autel, et le Christ, l'abbesse et sa crosse,
Tout evanouit dans un éclat de rire feroce.
Et ceci fut l'exploit de Blas el Matador.

Yet, at that moment, neither cared to meet the other's eyes.

So there ensued rather an embarrassing silence; during which Bessie moved away and began to set the fire in order; whilst the Lawyer gazed out into the deepening twilight,

whistling a low monotonous tune. After a while he too rose; and—muttering something about ‘letters to write before post-time’—went his way without more words. Nor was the subject of their last discourse alluded to by either of the cousins during the two days which brought Daventry’s visit to an end. He departed, not without a hint as to the probable necessity for his return at no very distant date. Those ‘affairs’ of Jem Standen’s seemed a web marvellously hard to unravel—if, indeed, the process were not the reverse of Penelope’s.

A great weight seemed lifted from the domestic atmosphere when that evil presence had removed itself from Mote. It may be doubted if even Mrs Maskelyne did not feel a temporary relief. It is certain that her manner towards her husband was, for some time, unusually gracious and caressing. She could not be quite insensible to the forbearance he had displayed of late entirely for her sake; a forbearance, too, very foreign to his real character, which—wilful by nature—had waxed more so from perpetual indulgence. So she was disposed to reward him, after the careless desultory fashion in which certain very wealthy persons display their liberality—sowing charity broad-cast, out of a granary too vast for handfulls to be missed from the store.

Richer, surely, than the rifler of all earth’s treasures, is he on whom a true woman—be she widow, wife, or maid—hath bestowed, from a free heart, the precious mite of love. How many men, I wonder, like Brian Maskelyne, having striven earnestly through life to attain that most excellent gift, die paupers, after all?

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LITTLE LADY.

THERE is a strong muster in the breakfast-room at Charteris Royal, though the morning meal has been set a full hour earlier than usual. The plan of the day is evident; for three or four women, and almost all the men, wear riding-gear more or less business-like. Squire Braybroke's hounds draw Pinkerton Wood—a famous cover on the Charteris estate, though over the Marlshire border—and all that goodly company intend, in one fashion or another, to take the field.

There are a few additions to the house-party since you saw them last. Amongst these are Seyton of Warleigh, and Kate his wife. They are tolerably frequent guests here, at all seasons; but on this particular occasion Tom, at least, has been invited for a special purpose, which will presently be made manifest.

Do you see that very small, slight woman near the lower end of the table; with flaxen hair braided closely round a pale, quiet face, quite child-like in diminutiveness of feature and innocence of expression; consuming her modest meal quickly, yet daintily withal, so that you are irresistibly reminded of some tiny bird feeding?

That is Alice Langton—better known in the Shires as “The Little Lady;” whose name stands first of all—if first there be—in the roll of English huntresses. She comes of a hard-riding Border blood. Her father, twelfth Earl of Cheviot, kept the hounds in his native county till he could hardly buy food for his kennel; the children of that house—boys and girls—were set in saddle almost before they could walk steadily. Lady Alice does her duty fairly in the state of life to which it has pleased Providence to call her; but her passion is the ‘pursuit;’ and she has been enabled, hitherto, to indulge it without serious loss or hindrance.

That is her husband; the grey-haired man, with a kind placid face, sitting over against her. Colonel Langton is an old Indian officer of some renown—rather scientific than martial. He took

a fair fortune out with him to the East; and about doubled it there by judicious speculation. When he returned, with liver not seriously impaired, still on the sunny side of fifty, he was considered rather an enviable *parti*. He too was of the Border-country; the Langtons and Cheviots had been friends and allies for many generations; so, perhaps, it was not unnatural that he should aspire to the Lady Alice's hand; though she was scarcely out of the school-room then, and the Colonel was but little younger than her father. At all events, she was not struck by the incongruity; for she accepted him cheerfully, and has never once regretted it since. They have been wedded some years, and have been perfectly happy in their quiet way, though no child has come to bind them closer together: some people say it is as well this should be so.

Colonel Langton takes care that his wife shall be carried safely, if it is in the power of horseflesh to insure it; and never dreams of grumbling at any price whatever. Three are amply sufficient for the needs of Lady Alice and her feather-weight of a groom—wherever she goes, men fight for the honour of mounting her—but these were nearly perfect when they were bought; and command a fabulous price after a season's tuition under her famous 'hands.'

The Colonel rides almost invariably with his wife to cover; beyond this his attendance is not deemed necessary. He wends his steady way homewards so soon as the hounds have fairly found, and busies himself with some "paper" that shall be spoken of hereafter in one of the societies—geographical or antiquarian—of which he is an honoured Fellow.

He used to be rather nervous, at first, about his child-wife,—too much so, indeed, to settle comfortably to work on hunting-days; but use is everything. She has gone on riding so long without any serious accident, that her husband has implicit confidence in her science, courage, and good fortune; and the hours do not seem very long, now, that will bring her back to his dressing-room—brim-full of the triumphs or disappointments of the day.

Do not suppose that there is anything fast or 'horsey' about the Little Lady. If a captious critic were bound to find fault, he would probably say that her manner was a turn too quiet. The

slang of the stable no more taints her language than its odours hang about her garments. She leads the van of chase—calm and serene as that Arch-Huntress of old, in whom gods no less than men revered the very type of Purity. The roughest of her field companions—gentle or simple—never let slip a coarse word or unseemly jest, wittingly, in Lady Alice's immediate presence ; as for familiarity, or the faintest approach thereunto, she is as strange to such a thing as Nelson was to fear.

But, with all her daring self-reliance, the Little Lady does not disdain a pilot on a strange country ; and this is her first appearance with the M. H. The distinguished honour of chaperoning her to-day has fallen to Seyton of Warleigh. Tom is not only the crack rider of these parts, but—from long experience, added to a natural genius for topography—is supposed to carry in his head a sort of Ordnance-map on a reduced scale, whereon the boundaries of every field in his county are plainly defined.

Our bonny Kate scans the fair stranger with just a little envy but without the faintest tinge of jealousy ; as she whispers to her next-door neighbour, an old Marlshire squire,—

“ What a lucky woman she is—to be allowed to ride as she likes ; and such horses too. She has brought all her own down with her, you know. What a nice winning little face it is ! I do so hope we shall have a run—a real quick thing ; and that Tom will get her a good start. He's sure to do that, though. And don't you think there *must* be a scent to-day ? I mean to watch Mrs Gaysforde's face, when she sees Lady Alice appear : she'll soon find out who it is ; and she'll get so dreadfully red and jealous ; and be so unhappy if she don't beat the stranger. Won't it be fun ? ”

To which the elder responds, after a pause and a struggle—he is slow of speech and mastication, and is busy on cold woodcock-pie—that—

“ Time will show. There's no counting on scent or women's fancies.”

And chuckles laboriously over his threadbare joke.

At the very end of the long table, next to the host, is Lady Dorrillon ; looking unutterably handsome, in a habit that fits her superb figure without a wrinkle, and a ravishing little round hat,

set coquettishly, though quite firmly, on the massive glossy braids beneath. You need scarcely be told who is her right-hand neighbour.

Vincent Flemyng got his orders for to-day, over-night. He is to squire Lady Dorrillon, who does not mean following the hounds, "unless he particularly wishes to ride up to them."

It would be hard to exaggerate the readiness with which Flemyng promised close and constant attendance on Flora's bridle-rein. Had no temptation held him back, he would have been perfectly miserable if he had been expected to go straight. For he had no more nerve than a baby; and yet he would not have confessed this for worlds. He had a fair excuse now—few ever had a fairer—for cleaving to the broad highways that lead not to destruction. Now, instead of being a butt for derision or banter, he must needs be a mark for all men's envy.

Should your eye perchance grow weary with gazing on one style of beauty, you have only to turn towards the hostess' end of the table, where the Fiametta presides; most becomingly, if fancifully, arrayed, in a sealskin Polonaise, with knots of dark-blue ribbon peeping out through muslin puffing at neck and wrists. Marion is in radiant spirits this morning; she has never yet seen Ranksborough *ride*, and is full of anticipations thereanent, which she has already confided to their object. The latter, no doubt, is very much gratified; but he only betrays it by a glance of languid gratitude and a slow meaning smile; whilst he dallies with the grapes that, with a glass of pure water, always terminate his morning-meal. But in despite of that indifference, real or assumed, the Lord Denzil means business to-day. He gave special orders over-night as to his first horse; and could choose no better, if the meet were Crick Gorse or Tilton Wood.

Ere long there is a general move, and a getting to horse or carriage, as the case may be. Marion plays propriety this morning—as she is fond of doing, *faute de mieux*—and takes Lady Greystoke in a barouche; of which Sir Marmaduke Dorrillon and Castlemaine fill the back seats.

John Charteris cares little for hunting himself, but he subscribes liberally to the hounds, on the principle of supporting all time-honoured county-institutions; and, going out himself occasionally,

as a matter of duty, encourages his guests to do likewise. His stud-groom is a treasure, and keeps his establishment well up to the mark. If there are no hunters of renown in the vast stables of Charteris Royal, there are always jumping hacks enough to mount any moderate number of guests, who do not aspire to going quite in the front rank; besides a few steady cobs suited to cautious sportsmen like Commissioner de Visme, who care not to trust their rotund persons too far from the ground. Furthermore, any who prefer it are welcome to bring their own horses: of this only Lady Alice Langton, Ranksborough, and Hardress have availed themselves.

The last-named, over-night, was generous enough to offer a mount to Bertie Grenvil. The Cherub—knowing his customer—was rather surprised, but suitably grateful. The sense of obligation will be greatly diminished when he realizes the nature of the gift-horse—an obstinate rusher, with only one side to his mouth, and that side almost unmanageable even by such masterly hands as will steer him to-day. Hardress bought him for a song out of a steeple-chasing stable, and thinks he may possibly get a fifty out of his purchase, by dint of schooling; which schooling he intends to see done by deputy, and gratuitously if possible. Luckily it is one of those cheery warm days, without being positively sunny, when Bertie's nerve stands to him well: in cold gloomy weather, as he himself plaintively avows, "a school girl might show him the way."

We will not linger on the portico-steps, though the scene is picturesque enough in its way. The three amazons were quickly mounted; Lady Alice and Kate being squired by their respective husbands; Flora Dorrillon by her lately installed favourite. Flemmyng's hand trembled so, when the tiny foot was laid in its palm, that the 'taking off' was both frail and insecure: it was rather the elastic strength of the delicate round ankle, than any foreign assistance, that set the fair dame saddle-fast without mishap.

And so they wended their way to meet—a gallant company as we easily see—whither we, too, will follow.

Pinkerton Wood was rather a favourable specimen of a cover 'down in the clays;' where you can hardly expect trim gorse-

islands in the midst of a gently swelling sea of pasture-ground. The extent might have been some sixty acres, with plenty of good lying in the centre and towards the lower side, where the undergrowth was thickest of brambles, bracken, and sedge. It had the reputation of generally holding a straight-goer ; besides, the road-riders and carriage-folk had a capital chance of seeing sport without spoiling it ; for the Pinkerton foxes almost invariably went away across the broad vale below, which ended in a blunt cone just here ; so that the spectators could follow a good deal of the run with glass or eye, by skirting the edge of the rising ground : they called it a ' hill ' in these parts—Heaven save the mark !

You who have hunted can fancy a meet ' in the clays ' just as well as I could describe it ; and others the sketch would not greatly interest.

Of course the character of the horse-flesh out—with a few exceptions—differs materially from what you would see in the ' grass.' Blood is invaluable in its way ; but blood alone would be sorely wasted, indeed almost useless, in this deep, strongly-fenced country ; with its aggravating small enclosures, where one has to be jumping everlastingly, and jumping in and out of plough. Blood and bone together are beyond the means of any but a very few of the Marlishire squires and yeomen ; so the most ambitious are fain to content themselves with such cattle as will carry them decently near their own hounds.

These, likewise, are bred rather for stoutness than speed : they are a pretty level lot, as you see—too big for most tastes, but well up to their rough work ; and they can race a bit, too, when they get upon the light land, which is found in a small division of the county.

Right seldom hereabouts are seen such costly animals as those that the Little Lady and Ranksborough are riding to-day—to say nothing of Hardress, who has a cheap two hundred guineas' worth under him.

The beautiful dark chestnut, curving her shining neck to meet the caress of the tiny gauntleted hand, has had more than one Queen's Plate credited to her in her time ; and if price could have tempted Colonel Langton, she would have been put to work again in a great steeple-chasing stable two years ago. They who

go for thorough-breds and nothing else point triumphantly to 'Camilla,' in answer to such sceptics as deny that animals who have been regularly trained can ever make perfectly pleasant hunters.

Of a very different stamp, though equally superb in his way, is Ranksborough's favourite, 'St Dunstan.' The soft full curves essential to equine no less than to feminine beauty, are wanting here. In their stead you see a massive squareness of perfect proportion, betokening vast muscular power combined with a rare turn of speed. St Dunstan's colour,—a rich blue-roan once—has waxed lighter now by several silvery shades; for this is his sixth season: he has won two Hunt cups for Ranksborough, besides several matches for heavy stakes, 'owners up;' and has taken his hunting-turn, twice a fortnight regularly, without once being sick or sorry, or impairing his fame by an absolute fall. His temper is uncertain, without being savage or sulky; and there are days when for ten minutes or so he will jump only on compulsion; but he has to deal with sharp spurs and hands of iron; and he has never once got much the best of a wrangle. In his present service the good horse will surely die; for men have got tired of tempting Ranksborough with fabulous prices, which only elicit a few curt words of rejection, pointed with a contemptuous smile.

Such cattle as these—to say nothing of their riders—would be sure to attract attention in any country. No wonder that as, leading the mounted party from Mote, they emerged into the forty-acre field, there is a stir and murmur of admiration, in the group already gathered round the hounds. There are few better judges of horse-flesh than the Marlshire yeomen.

Mr Braybroke advances to meet the new-comers, with a little more earnestness than usual in his cordial courtesy. Others, perchance, may surpass the Squire's salute in grace or dignity, when he enters a saloon or lounges near the Rails; but the sweep of his cap, from the saddle, is simply perfection; and has won, they say, approving smiles from Royalty itself. He knows all the Mote party, saving the Lady Alice; to her he is presented at once, by Seyton, with due form and ceremony. Frank's handsome face flushes like a boy's with pride and pleasure, as he does

the honours of the M. H. to the distinguished stranger; and "hopes to show her some sport, not quite unworthy of her riding."

One glance, however, rests on the Little Lady neither amicably nor admiringly; it is levelled through a glass screwed into the crook-handle of a very business-like hunting-crop; that crop is grasped in a large well-formed hand of yonder imposing amazon, who sits her powerful bay so squarely.

Mrs Gaysforde owns to a liberal 'forty off:' her proportions, always luxurious, have developed themselves, in spite of constant hard exercise, somewhat inconveniently of late; but her ruddy and cheerful countenance glows only with natural health; and her bright eyes dance still, jocosely as ever. She is the most good-natured, easy-tempered creature living in all respects save one. She can't bear to be beat by any woman over her own country. In truth this feat has very seldom been accomplished. With an intermission of five years, she has not missed a season with the M. H. since her girlhood; and her fame has gone on waxing instead of waning: no native rival has arisen whose pluck and science could wrest the lead from Bell Gaysforde and keep it. She is a good deal heavier than in the old days; but her horses are well over her weight; while her nerve and hands are trustworthy as ever.

The gap in her hunting-diary above referred to, occurred immediately after her marriage to a very wealthy grazier in the North Country. There she resided contentedly enough—though the wild open moor-land was a sore trial to her, and she scarcely cared to ride over it—till a sudden pleurisy carried off her husband, and left her a wealthy childless widow. As soon as she had set her house in order and could prudently move, Mrs Gaysforde came back to her own people, without any pretence of inconsolable sorrow. She might have married a dozen times since; but prefers to 'leave well alone;' and has kept house ever since for her brother—yonder burly parson, with a keen hard-bitten face, and close-cropped iron-grey hair—who is glad to share her influence and proud to pilot her across country. With a very slight effort the pair might have pushed their way upwards into the ranks of the squirearchy; but neither cared to be at such pains; they were content to seek

such society as they needed, amongst the better of the good old yeoman-stock from which they themselves had sprung.

The anticipations of that mischievous Kate were quickly realized. It must be owned that the rich damask on the buxom widow's cheek deepened by three shades, as she scanned the small quiet-looking stranger, after being made aware of her name. The Little Lady's renown was so thoroughly established, that Mrs Gaysforde could not pretend to ignore it; and, sooth to say, the aspect of both horse and rider impressed her considerably; nevertheless she came up to time, with a valiant effort; and sniffed defiance, if not disdain.

"Yes—they look like going"—she muttered. "And they'd be hard to beat over the grass, I dare say. Though how those baby-hands can hold a horse together, quite puzzles me. But I don't believe in the Shire cracks holding their own for long, hereabouts. They *will* try to fly everything; and about the fourth bank always brings them to grief. Don't you remember Miss Ormsby, Ben—the handsome dark-haired girl, who came down from Lincolnshire to show us all the way? She didn't make much of a hand of it, you'll remember."

Now the reverend Benjamin Bartram was something saturnine of temper, and apt to look on the seamy side of most matters. The world had gone smoothly enough with him of late; but he had had hard uphill work for many a year, when—being one of eleven children—he was fain to struggle on, as best he might, on a curate's stipend. He was singularly niggard of encouragement as a rule, and made answer now rather sourly.

"I don't know so much about that. The mare looks as if she could go over any country; and the lady didn't get her name for nothing, I'll be sworn. The Ormsby girl never rode cattle like yonder one; and she hadn't Tom Seyton to pilot her. That's about the mark of it this morning, unless I'm much mistaken. Besides, Bell—you give lumps of weight away."

The jovial widow was not a whit disconcerted at the fraternal frankness: perhaps she was used to it: indeed, as you will have already observed, both were more forcible than elegant in the manner of their speech.

"You're right there, Ben," she replied with perfect gravity.

“ But I’ve a good stone in hand on Oakapple ; and he never was fitter. Anyhow we can but do our best. I’m not afraid—if you are. Don’t take your eye off Tom Seyton, whilst we’re drawing : they shan’t get the better of the start, at all events. Hold Oakapple’s head for a minute, will you ? ”

Thus having delivered herself, the lady enacted a certain ceremony, very significant to such as had witnessed it before. From the recesses of a deep saddle-pocket she drew forth a small morocco case ; from which she produced a pair of the lightest and neatest gold-rimmed spectacles that ever were seen. These she proceeded to adjust with great deliberation and composure : the effect was rather quaint, yet not altogether unbecoming to the comely countenance. She had been a little short-sighted from a child ; but the glass let into the buck-horn handle of her whip was sufficient for any ordinary emergencies : when the spectacles were donned, all the hunting-world of Marlshire knew that Bell Gaysforde meant business in earnest.

There is a goodly show of carriages of all descriptions in the great pasture where the hounds are still lingering, for the turf is sound and the approaches easy ; whilst the Squire—considering this a sort of show-meet—gives the dawdlers and dangles ten minutes’ law.

You may guess that there is no more attractive equipage on the ground than that of La Reine Gaillarde, especially as Blanche Ellerslie reclines by her side. In spite of their little jealousies and occasional heartburnings, they are great allies—those two ; having many sympathies and plots in common. In the tiny hind-seat is perched Leo Armytage, who plays groom for to-day, and seems to like his part amazingly : the professional being in attendance as out-rider.

The boy looks very interesting, with his left arm in a sling of crimson silk : he had a rattling fall last week, and sprained his wrist badly ; so that he cannot take the saddle at present. At least so says the sufferer himself ; though divers of his comrades, envious of his present position, won’t have it at all ; asserting that “ it’s all a sham, Leo’s keeping on the sick-list. It’s only because he wants to be petted.” Which want, according to all appearances, is not unlikely to be supplied.

So perhaps thinks Colonel Vereker Vane, who for the last ten minutes has been vainly trying to cut in ; so as to intercept, if not divert, the current of nods and becks and smiles and whippers, that passes incessantly between the fore and hind seats of the pony-phaeton. But the coming coquette whom, he flattered himself, he had tamed, has evidently glided out of the toils ; and is free as air again, to rove according to her wicked will. She has neither eyes nor ears for her sometime adorer to-day ; and answers his questions only with careless languid monosyllables, that scarcely break the even flow of her fresh flirtation. Vereker would never have forgiven you if you had suggested that he could, by any possibility, be jealous of his beardless subaltern : nevertheless he would not dare to pry too closely into his own breast, just now. The *Sabreur's* discomfort is further increased by the unsociable behaviour of the fiery chestnut he is riding. The brute—naturally nervous like most of his colour—is a little above himself to-day ; he keeps sidling and curvetting about till the ponies, corrupted by the evil example, begin to fret in their turn ; and Vane, for very shame, is forced to take ground to the right, far beyond ear-shot of his tormentress.

To him, at least, it is rather a relief when Frank Braybroke announces that the time of grace is up, with a significant nod to the huntsman ; and the hounds—trooping to Will Griswold's "Cop away : cop"—lead off towards Pinkerton Wood, about a furlong distant.

You never noticed perhaps, in the crowd, our old acquaintance Tony Cannell. There the man-mountain sits in his high roomy gig, with his famous grey trotter in the shafts. Tony is an indefatigable 'pursuer' on wheels ; and generally sees enough of a run to know how his own horses are going.

"You may break their necks if you like ; but make 'em jump," is his usual formula.

Much in these words he has just addressed his head-man—or rather boy—to whom is entrusted the pleasant task of steering a raw raking five-year-old over about the stiffest on-and-off country in England. And the lad answers, "All right, master ;" just as cheerily as if bones were made of gutta-percha, and necks

were spiral springs. As the crowd begins to file off, and the road becomes a little clear, the old dealer draws up alongside of the Brancepeth phaeton.

"Beg your pardon, my lady"—he says (Tony bestows this title freely on every female above the rank of farmeress); "if you don't mind followin' me, I think I can put you right. I've been here afore, when the wind set steady, as it does to-day."

Laura Brancepeth thanks him with her own familiar nod and smile; and, getting her ponies well in hand, rattles off in the track of the flashing gig-wheels; at a pace that will make even the trotting mare look alive, if she would keep her lead.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A CRACKER OVER THE CLAY.

Now nothing is easier—on paper—than to bring off a run just to suit the congruities of place and time. Nevertheless such things do happen in real life sometimes. I, who write, not two years ago, saw the run of the season with a certain famous North Country pack: the meet was within six miles of the cathedral city, where two-thirds of the vast and goodly company present had been treading measures till day-break. So it need not seem too strange to be true, if similar luck befall the actors in this drama of ours.

There was a faint whimper deepening into a prolonged note, and swelling soon into a rattling chorus, before the hounds had half drawn Pinkerton Wood: in three minutes more Will Griswold—with a scream that made every ear within shot of him tingle again—views the fox across a narrow green ride.

"It's the old customer, by G—d"—says the huntsman, smiting his thigh with unusual energy. "I'd know his grey sprinkle among a thousand."

A straight-goer evidently; but the hounds are too close on his

track to leave him much choice or chance of 'hanging.' Long before the unfortunates, who are always at issue with their girths or reins or stirrup-leathers, can settle into their saddles, another holloa in rounder and fuller tones, from the lower corner of the wood, gives notice that the fox has broken in the best possible line—right over the vale.

"Come on, my lord"—says Jim Stileman, Cannell's show rider, as Ranksborough hesitates for a second or two, in the broad middle-ride (he invariably goes into cover with the hounds). "We've got no time to lose. That was Squire Seyton viewed him away. He's allus in the right place somehow."

And, with no more ado, the two go crashing through high-fell and underwood, till they blunder over the blind boundary-fence into a wide sloping pasture. The pack are hardly got together yet; and Seyton knows better than to steal away with five or six couple; so that Ranksborough and about a score more start fair with him, after all.

Tom has found time to bestow several words of counsel and encouragement on his charge, in whom he has already conceived a very great interest; indeed a harder heart might have been won by her manner and smile, as she avowed herself "quite safe in his care, if he didn't mind being troubled with her."

"I have never before been so honoured, Lady Alice"—Seyton answered, in his simple straightforward way: "so I don't know how I shall acquit myself. But I wouldn't change places with any man out, I know. We shall have some awkward fencing to-day; for the ditches hereabouts are as deep as main-drains; and the banks are narrow, and not always sound. But if your mare is as clever as you say she is, she'll soon learn where to put her feet, by watching old Adamant. This is his third season; and he's only given me two falls, which were both my fault. We've the pace of everything out, I feel sure, unless it's St Dunstan; so that we can easily make up lee-way if we have to skirt a little."

"If you'll promise to go exactly as if you had no troublesome stranger to chaperon, I shall be quite satisfied"—Lady Alice said. "Please do promise that: I shall be quite unhappy if you don't."

Seyton looked steadily in her clear blue eyes for a second or more: what he saw there seemed to satisfy him.

"Yes—I'll promise that—he answered. There was scant time for compliments; for just then the first hound spoke on cover; and thenceforward both kept discreet silence, till the fox broke within a rod or so of their horses' feet.

So they sweep down the gentle incline, and across the broad level vale beneath; the real front-rankers drawing steadily and surely away from the rest, as men will do who, picking their place in the next fence as they land in each field, make their point without flinch or swerve; the others dropping gradually back to the "ruck" that are still swarming out of Pinkerton Wood.

As yet there is no jealousy about the lead; for the pace, though fast enough for most people, is not exactly racing; and even Ranksborough is too good a sportsman to press on the hounds, especially in a strange country. He and Will Griswold are riding nearly abreast on the left, with Jim Stileman in close attendance: on the right, Seyton and Lady Alice have certainly a little the best of it; Parson Bartram and his sister are lying well up, evidently biding their time. But the widow's comely face is cloudy with care, as she watches Camilla gliding over deep ground as easily as if it were the soundest turf; and sees her take an awkward double ditch in her stride; just dropping her hind-legs on the narrow bank mid-way.

"We shan't get the measure of her just yet, Ben"—Mrs. Gaysforde remarks; ranging up alongside of her brother for an instant. To which his Reverence nods a sulky assent; and bids her—"mind where she's going to, instead of chattering; for there's a lot of blind grips ahead."

Right through the centre of the vale runs the Swarle; a navigable stream (though never used as such) at most seasons, and swollen now with heavy recent rains. You can trace its course, very plainly, by the coarse rushy meadows that on either bank lie betwixt the tilth and the water's edge. For a while the hounds run parallel with the river; but suddenly they turn abruptly towards it; and Tom Seyton speaks for the first time since they went away.

"It's the old Pinkerton fox, Lady Alice. I thought I knew him when he broke cover: he's gone right over the Swarle; he served us that trick last year, and beat us at last. There's a ford in the next meadow but one: it'll be too deep for comfort, I fear; but the bridge is half a mile higher. Shall we try it?"

"The ford, of course," says the Little Lady. "I suppose the river is *quite* impracticable, here?"

"Utterly so: it's over-head close under the banks; and a muddy bottom to boot. No one in his senses would attempt it. But—by Jove I don't know—we've got one madman out, if not two. I hope to Heaven they'll come to no serious grief; and they can gain little by it, either; for the fox is bound to turn to us when we get over, if he keeps on sinking the wind."

Will Griswold had realized the state of things quite as soon as Seyton did; and, as he himself wheeled towards the right, cried out to Ranksborough warningly.

"That's the Swarle right ahead of us, my lord. It's no use looking at it: it's hardly to be done at the best o' times; and it's coming down in flood to-day."

Denzil nodded his head, to show that he heard; but never turned it. If you had been near enough you might have seen his slumberous eyes light up like fire-balls: here was a rare chance of cutting down a field—a strange field too, or nearly so; for he had not often shown in Marlshire—and Marion Charteris, perchance, within ken. The temptation was too strong: he stroked St Dunstan's brawny shoulder, and spoke a few words in the low caressing tone that the old horse knew right well; and so rode down straight at the water.

But he rides not down—alone. Another man singles himself out from the front-rank, as they, too, all bend to the right; and comes hurling over the plashy meadow at headlong speed; actually racing with Ranksborough for the perilous honour of 'first in.' That other is Vereker Vane.

He was a well-conditioned *Sabreur* in the main; but his best friends allowed that 'it was the devil and all to pay' when his temper was fairly roused; as was, surely, the case this morning. In addition to other crosses he had been very unlucky in the start; and had been forced to make desperate running to catch

the first flight when he did. But even this sharp gallop had not brought 'The Plunger' comfortably to his bridle; he was still boring and tearing at the reins, in a fashion that must have tired the patience of a saint (Alas! out of W——shire, saints are rarely found in the saddle). Vane was neither a cockney nor a coward, so it never occurred to him to seek a vent for his wrath in ill-usage of the animal he rode; nevertheless he did think that The Plunger would be none the worse for a lesson.

"So you *won't* stand still when you're asked?" says the Colonel, through his set teeth, as they splash over the meadow. "And you *will* pull one's arms off while you're going. Your blood wants cooling, my friend—so does mine, for that matter. We'll see if the Swarle will do it for us. I don't see why my lord is to have all the bathing to himself."

He has caught Ranksborough by this time, and they reach the river-brink nearly at the same instant about thirty yards apart.

The most dauntless of mortals—not utterly desperate—might stand excused for 'looking before leaping' here. Yet, truly, the longer you looked the less you would have liked it. Can anything be more discouraging than that murky water—red-brown save where it is flecked with paler foam-clots—swashing to the very lip of the treacherous banks with slow smooth swirls?

But Ranksborough—who either by luck or judgment has struck a spot where there is a slight shelf—puts St Dunstan at it without a second glance; first knotting the reins to prevent a tangle. The old horse, when he does refuse, always does so at a small place, on the 'I could if I would' principle: he has too much sense, or proper pride, to play the fool on an occasion like this. So he slides in quite coolly, and strikes off like a water-spaniel; keeping his head well up the current, which is rather sullen than strong.

It is very easy to write about horse-swimming, or even to give instructions thereanent; but—*experto crede*—the early practical lessons are rather difficult. I don't think you have an idea of the elasticity of water till you have felt it insinuating

itself under and round your person; gently constraining you to part company with saddle, if not with steed.

But those two have evidently 'taken soil' together ere now; and there is little fear but that they will reach the farther bank, towards which they are making steady way: how they will get out, is another matter.

It fared not so well with Vereker Vane. He was not so lucky in his place, to begin with; for everywhere near him the banks were broken and steep. He was too proud to follow exactly in Ranksborough's track; so he tried to force The Plunger in just where he stood. The horse braced himself on his forelegs, till they grew rigid as iron bars; and snorted convulsively, as he shivered from crest to fetlock; steel and whipcord were plainly worse than useless; for both are cruelly wasted on an agony of fear. Vane knew this; indeed, he never once lost his head, though he was no more to be warned back from his purpose than a mad Malay. He seemed to yield to The Plunger's refusal for an instant; but as the animal wheeled away inland, a sharp wrench of the right rein made him rear perforce: they were so close to the edge that but one thing could happen—the thing that Vereker intended. The bank gave way under the sudden shock of the hind-hoofs; and horse and rider slipped backwards, the last-named being undermost as they sank.*

Happily the water was deep enough to make drowning the chiefest danger. But, even with this given in, Alec Turnbull very nearly stepped into another death-vacancy. And had it been so, I wis there would not have been a sadder heart in the Princess's Own than the honest Major's.

The first object that showed on the surface was the fore-part of a remarkably neat boot—Vane was specially choice in his hunting attire—and then the struggling bodies of man and horse, jumbled together after a horribly grotesque fashion.

* The rest of the word-painting must take its chance; but I am anxious that certain hunting-scenes should not seem—to *hunting men*—over-coloured. Lest this incident should appear so, I take leave to remark that it did actually occur, as described here, not far from Windsor about a score of years ago. Perhaps some, then serving in the Household Brigade, may not yet have forgotten it; any more than some old Etonians will have forgotten 'Fighting Douglas.'

But three or four labourers happened to be ditching close by; and had left their work in open-mouthed wonder to watch the two riders making straight for the Swarle. By a piece of luck verging on the miraculous, these worthy men did not lose their wits and presence of mind just when these were most wanted. One of them, who could swim, plunged boldly into the river, and caught The Plunger's bridle, at great risk of being himself struck down; whilst the others ventured in, with clasped hands, far enough to help their comrade, and drag the whole group to shore.

It was five minutes or more before his rare good pluck and physical strength, aided by copious draughts from his hunting-flask, brought Vereker Vane sufficiently to himself to thank and reward his deliverers. He did the first curtly enough; the second—so liberally, that the entire party, their friends, and neighbours, spent the next fortnight in an unbroken drink. The Plunger was scarcely in better case; but we need not follow the pair plodding slowly and wearily homewards.

The splash reached Ranksborough's ear as he neared the further bank: he turned his head, and frowned slightly—this was his usual way of expressing concern—but the idea of returning to give assistance never crossed his mind. He was not cruel or particularly unfeeling; but he had a high idea of the tough vitality of the human frame; in which, perhaps, he was justified by a long course of experiments on his own. They did not land without a struggle; but Ranksborough vaulted off cleverly directly they touched ground, and helped St Dunstan up with voice and hand. Very soon the old horse stood by his master's side, shaking himself and snorting triumphantly; and without more ado the pair went sailing off again, on the best possible terms with themselves and the world in general; though it *was* somewhat hard to see the hounds, after puzzling a little in the meadow, bend off towards the right, as if on purpose to let the forders—if not the bridge-riders—in. But it is a truism to remark, that less often in the chase than in any other pursuit does singular daring meet with adequate reward.

That same ford did not look over-tempting when Seyton rode down upon it, leading the score or so who scorned to make for

the safer bridge-road. Tom indeed glanced back at his fair charge rather doubtfully. But she only nodded her head in evident impatience; and, gathering up her skirt—short enough already—went in almost abreast with Adamant. They got safely through, as did the rest; though the water was more than girth-deep, and laved high over the shining instep of the Lady Alice's dainty hunting-boot.

As was aforesaid, the hounds were turning to them; so they lost scarce any ground; and Will Griswold was up just when he was wanted: it was the briefest check conceivable; and a timely holloa was hardly needed to set the ball rolling merrily again.

Now the real jealous riding begins. Ranksborough, of course, is less than ever to be denied: indeed his late feat had so impressed the field (though they were too busy to notice how it was managed) that none cared to contest the lead with him on the left. Even the huntsman is content to follow in his wake: muttering, every now and then, a meek caution—

"Not *too* fast, my lord. Give 'em a *little* time—rather to assert his own position, than because he is seriously afraid of Denzil's over-riding the hounds, who are carrying a tremendous head just now.

On the right the Little Lady still keeps her place close to Seyton's quarter, who decidedly leads. But the native amazon is creeping up closer and closer; forcing the Parson on, whether he will or no: it is clear that Marlshire means to try conclusions with the stranger ere long. The most provoking part of it is, that Lady Alice seems so utterly unconscious of rivalry.

"If she'd only looked round once, to see where I was, my dear,"—Bell Gaysforde said afterwards, with a passionate sob,—"I'd have tried to forgive her."

So for half a league or more they bore straight along the southern slope of the vale, which lies nearly due east and west; but near some farm buildings the hounds began to bend somewhat abruptly to the left; it was clear that the fox had crossed the crest of the rising ground. Directly they turned Seyton took a pull at his horse, and dropped back alongside his charge.

"We must steady them a bit here"—he said. "At least, I

must. You'll see why, presently. Conacre is his point now—five good miles away—and he'll about make it, if he's not headed in the road above there."

Lady Alice did as she was bidden, without comment or question: so it happened, that Parson Bartram and his sister took the next fence—a flying one—in front; and held their lead over the pasture beyond. As they landed in the second field, the reason for Tom's sudden fit of caution became plain.

Right across their line stretched an apparently endless flight of ugly black rails; high and tough enough to spoil the appetite of the veriest glutton at timber-jumping—to say nothing of the take-off being against the hill. To the extreme left-hand corner, almost out of sight, was a gateway. Parson Bartram, followed by his sister, made straight for this, without hesitation: so did every one else, with the exception of some half-dozen, who held straight on. Seyton and Lady Alice were amongst these last.

But when Tom was within seventy yards of the timber, his stout heart sank within him; not—as you can well believe—with personal fear. He had only once, himself, jumped those rails (indeed they had not long been put up to their present height): then the ground was with him; and he remembered right well with what a rattle and scramble he got over. He dared not take the responsibility of leading the delicate little being, who had followed him thus far so fearlessly, into such a risk of life and limb. So, with a heavy sigh—for he guessed what a block there would be in the gateway ere they could hope to reach it—he began to bear off to the left. But, before he had fairly turned, a sweet clear voice spoke, startlingly close to his ear.

"Straight on: quite straight, please. I know we can do it."

Looking over his shoulder, Seyton met—he has not forgotten it yet—the pretty childish face, still wearing its bright confident smile; and the blue eyes, resolute as death.

"I never in my life was thoroughly nervous, till that minute," Tom said afterwards. "But I had no choice in the matter: you *can't* flinch with a woman like that behind you. So I pulled Adamant together as well as I could, and sent him at it

with a will. He did all he knew, poor old boy! But he hit it with every leg he had, I can tell you. I looked round before I had well picked him up; and just caught Camilla in the air. I give you my honour, she never rattled a hoof; and landed as light as thistledown. As the mare settled to her stride again, Lady Alice stroked her with that absurd little baby-hand; and said—'Very prettily done, my pet,' as coolly as if five feet of stiff timber were the sort of thing to take in an exercise gallop. I didn't get my breath again till we were close on the next fence, I know."

A second or two later, comes from the left the dull, cracking sound, too familiar to every hunting-car. Ranksborough always goes fearfully fast at timber; on the simple principle that "what you can't jump, you may break;" and he illustrates his theory triumphantly now, by smashing a tough top-rail like a pipe-stem: St Dunstan is down on his head; but, between them, they save a fall cleverly. Thereupon Will Griswold and three others, who have been waiting on Denzil on the chance of some such contingency, harden their hearts and go gallantly at the gap. One other man takes it in a fresh place; and comes into the field beyond in a ghastly crumpled heap. That is Jim Stileman, for any even money; and you may bet, with equal safety, on his coming to time within five minutes; not a whit the worse for a fall that would have laid up you or me for the rest of the season.

How fares it, meanwhile, with the bold and buxom widow? Truly, not so well as her many friends could wish. There is no padlock on the gate; but the hook is jammed in the staple. So that the Parson is fain to dismount—muttering certain anathemas, that would scarce be approved of by Convocation. Whilst he is still tugging, he is startled by a faint cry from his sister, echoed by a murmur of surprise from the crowd already closing in between them.

Mrs Gaysforde's handsome eyes are filling with angry tears.

"Oh, Ben,"—she says, almost sobbing. "She—*she means to have it, after all!*"

The Parson looks up just in time to see the big leap taken; the sight gives him energy to wrench the obstinate iron from

its hold ; and, as he scrambles to saddle, he grumbles out—half admiringly—

“ Well—they deserve to get the lead : and they’ll keep it too. Look how the hounds are turning ; and the scent bettering every minute. We’ll never fairly catch ’em again before they get to Conacre, unless a check lets us up.”

To which Bell Gaysforde answers never a word ; she gallops on mechanically with the rest, but the steel is out of her for to-day. Why be hard any longer on poor honest Oak-apple ? Even if they catch the others again, and she should hold her own with the stranger thenceforward, will that lighten the sense of defeat which lies heavy on her soul ? If it were not for fear of ridicule, and of her brother, she would make straight home at once.

There, with many wishes for her better luck in future, we will leave the discomfited amazon. We may safely get forward, even ahead of the racing pack ; for they who have eaten of fern-seed need not fear heading the fox.

The manner of Kate Seyton’s hunting has been before alluded to. She was usually wont to make her points for herself, and ride after her own inventions. But to-day she had entrusted herself to other guidance. Old Ralph Swynnerton—Kate’s neighbour at breakfast—had been a noted rider in his day ; and managed still to see more sport than most people, despite of increasing flesh and infirmities. He was rather crabbed in the field ; and seldom liked to be put on escort-duty ; so when he offered to pilot Mrs Seyton, she took it as a great compliment, and accepted readily. Before the hounds were thrown into cover, those two had crept down a by-lane that led them wide of the wood, on the right through some arable-land, till they came down on the Swarle, close to the bridge above alluded to.

“ If they come over the vale we shall see as much of it as any one,” old Raph said. “ And, with this start, we can make our points pretty much as we choose. If they go dead up-wind, we’re done for. But it’s five to one against that. I shouldn’t wonder if they went right over the water. A Pinkerton Wood

fox took that line last year; and he may be back again in his old quarters, for aught we know."

You may fancy Kate's satisfaction as she watched the early part of the run; and saw how capitally they were placed for seeing more of it. But her cavalier betrayed no sign of content till the hounds bore straight for the Swarle. Then he indulged in a gruff chuckle of triumph.

"What did I tell you?" he said. "Come on, Mrs Seyton: we've no time to lose."

They were over the vale, and safe out of harm's way on the opposite rising-ground, long before the pack—or, possibly, the fox—crossed their line. So they rode along the ridge, parallel with the 'hunt,' for some distance; till Mr Swynnerton checked his horse suddenly at the corner of a broad green lane.

"Hold hard, ma'am. If we get much forwarder, we might head him. Conacre's his point, for a thousand."

They did not stir till the hounds had turned, as described above, and were coming right up to them: then they trotted sharply on again, towards the point in the lane where the hounds seemed likely to cross it.

"Look there," said old Ralph, with his grim smile—"we're not far out: that's where the fox went by not two moments back,"—he points to where some sheep have just scurried together under a row of wheat-stacks. "Now, let's see who has the best of it. They've come a cracker over the stiffest part of the vale."

In another second or two Kate has dropped her reins, and very nearly her whip, as she clasps her hands in a tumult of excitement; and her merry voice rings out like a silver bugle.

"Who has the best of it? Why, *we* are leading by a hundred yards; even Lord Ranksborough is not in the same field; and the rest are hardly in sight. Oh, Mr Swynnerton; did you see the way they took that last fence—a double ditch I'm certain—wasn't it perfect?"

Kate's triumph is not exaggerated. It is as she has said. On the right, nearly level with the racing pack, Tom Seyton is cutting out all the work; and still seems going at his ease.

Close on his quarter—the fresh bloom scarcely deepened on her cheek, and not a hair in her trim braids dishevelled—comes the Little Lady. Ranksborough was nearly brought to grief a few fields back in a boggy landing; and dares not press St Dunstan too hard to make up his lost ground; for that swimming-match is beginning to tell upon the good horse, in spite of his gameness.

The hounds flash across the turf-road like lightning; but their heads go up on the field beyond; for they are somewhat puzzled by the sheep-foil.

As Tom lands in the lane, he holds up his hand mechanically (for Lady Alice needs no warning); and his quick eye, roving to left and right, lights on his wife, just as the latter pushes forward to join him.

“You here, my Kate? This is better than I expected; though I knew you were in Swynnerton’s charge. We’ve had *such* a quick thing so far—over such a country! We’ve burst him so too that I don’t think he’ll get to Conacre to-day. If Will were only up, to put ’em forrard!” He lowered his voice here. “I’d give a cool hundred that Lady Alice should see a kill in the open. You’ve no notion how she rides.”

For a second or two Mrs Seyton gazes into her husband’s glowing face very fondly and proudly; then her expression changed, and became plaintive—not to say piteous.

“Mayn’t I go a little way with you, Tom—just for this once? That’s nothing of a place”—she pointed to the fence out of the lane—“and the country looks so light and open beyond.”

It was a great feat of moral gymnastics, when Seyton braced himself to the baulking of any one of his wife’s fancies: reasonable enough they were, as a rule. It was almost too much to expect, even from her sweet temper, that she should contentedly see her husband ride off to chaperon a stranger; leaving her planted there. Just at that moment the hounds went off at score; and all Tom’s prudent scruples vanished like smoke.

“Come along, then, darling,” he said. “But for Heaven’s sake don’t be rash. And if we come to a big place, you *must* go for a gate: there are plenty, just behind us, to keep you in countenance. Hold up, Adamant!”

And they are off full sail again, with Ranksborough close up ; but with a good field's start of Will Griswold and the foremost of the second rank.

Mrs Seyton had only spoken the truth about the country before them. They were well on the light land now ; and each fence was easier than the last ; till it became simple galloping ground, over which a quick thorough-bred might have held his own with St Dunstan or Camilla. Kate was quite at her ease here ; for the Kitten was as fresh as if she had just left her stable. She never forgot those delicious minutes ; nor Lady Alice's winning words and ways, as they swept on, side by side, over the great fallows and sandy tilths, divided only by fences that a horse could fly pleasantly in his stride. Suddenly, Tom Seyton began to peer eagerly forward, shading his eyes with his hand.

"Yonder he goes!"

The shrill piercing tones made even Kate start in her saddle : but her heart gave a wilder bound as she thought she saw a slender brown streak slip under some straggling rails that nearly cut the sky line. Frank Braybroke—despite a succession of brilliant 'nicks,' a long way in the rear—heard that screech, and put on all the steam that was left him. Several, too, in the second rank made a last desperate effort ; but every horse had had nearly enough ; Will Griswold himself never could reach the leaders. As they top the crest of the low hill a tremendous crash tells that the pack have broken from scent to view ; the old hounds strain madly to the front, as they tear down the slope, and before the middle of the next fallow is won, the straight-goer has died game, fairly in the open, within three furlongs of Conacre Carrs—his point from first to last.

So it befell, that amongst the four who actually saw the Pinkerton fox rolled over, two women's names are written. If his brush was swung that evening at Alice Langton's pommel, his head meets you still as you enter Kate Seyton's modest sanctum at Warleigh.

Though it was many a day before Marlshire ceased to talk of that famous run, I fear we may have dallied over it too long for your taste. It skills not now to rehearse how Hardress, having

dropped his hind-legs into four consecutive drains, "d—d the country up in heaps," and went home discontentedly; nor how Bertie Grenvil, after two rattling falls, thought he had done too much for profit and enough for honour; and followed Lionel's example by a longer and more leisurely route, as will hereafter be seen. Nor how Daddy Goring—out-paced from the very first—rode the line conscientiously, taking every fence as it came, great or small; and, returning, averred that "he had never enjoyed a run so thoroughly in his life."

All these matters—and other minor incidents—you can easily fancy. Only one remark deserves to be recorded for its characteristic coolness. When all congratulations and comments were over, and the parties were forming whose homeward way lay together, Lord Ranksborough put this pensive question to the world in general—

"By the bye—does any one happen to know if Vereker Vane ever got out of the Swarle? He looked as if he meant stopping there when I saw him last."

CHAPTER XXIX.

BY-WAYS AND BY-PLAY.

WE were bound to keep with those who rode that 'cracker over the clay' to the very end: but now we have leisure to glance aside at others who have taken no more active share in the proceedings than generally falls to the lot of such as—according to the old 'tag' not more trite than true—

Spectatum veniunt; veniunt spectentur at ipsæ.

And first, let us follow the Brancepeth phaeton.

Tony Cannell turned off from the main road at the same point at which Ralph Swynnerton had left it, but followed another lane which led along the edge of the upland for a mile or so. They

came to a gate here, which the outrider opened, and found themselves in a good-sized piece of sound pasture, commanding a view over far the larger portion of the vale of the Swarle.

"We'll bide here a bit, my lady, if you please,"—the horse-dealer said. "They're pretty sure to cross the wale with this wind: and with them glasses o' yours you'll see 'em as if you was in your box at the theayter."

Both Lady Laura and Mrs Ellerslie had their binoculars ready: neither had they long to wait, as you know, before the spectacle began. Tony Cannell's small, grey, deep-sunken eyes needed no assistance from art: into most matters he could see as far as his neighbours—into some a good deal farther. He watched the scene below, evidently with lively interest, carrying on the while a low muttered commentary

"That's Squire Seyton leading on the right. Blessed if he ain't a settlin' down to his work already. And that's the strange lady close alongside of him; she as they say rides so well. Wonder how Mrs Gaysforde likes it: dreadful jealous 'oman Mrs Gaysforde; good sort tho' for all that. She and the Parson are lyin' well up, I can see. And there's my lord a steamin' away on the left, with Will, and—yes, I'm blessed if it ain't—our Jim waitin' on him. Good lad, Jim: I'll make it up to him somehow, if my lord should take a fancy to the young 'un. He's going a bit too fast though; the take-off's werry unsartain to some 'o them wale-fences; and the landin's ain't much better. Ah-h—I thought so: well saved tho'; but only two o' them stumbles go to a crumpler."

So the horse-dealer went maundering on, till suddenly he broke off, and spoke aloud.

"Beg pardon, my lady. Look sharp now, towards the left: you'll see somethin' worth lookin' at, I reckon."

It was just at this instant that the leading hounds took water, and Ranksborough—alone at first—rode down straight on the Swarle.

Lady Laura's blithe face grew somewhat grave, and her brilliant colour waxed paler as she gazed.

"Good Heaven!"—she said in suppressed tones, without removing the glass from her eyes—"I do believe Denzil Ranksborough

means swimming the Swarle. It's a horribly dangerous place at the best of times, I've heard, and it must be coming down in flood after all those rains. Why doesn't somebody stop him?"

"He is not easily stopped, if all tales are true," Mrs Ellerslie remarked languidly: "nor easily hurt either. It will be rather interesting to watch him: I suppose no one else will be mad enough to follow? Mr Armytage, I think I'll trouble you for my glasses. I didn't calculate on a sensation scene when I graciously lent them to you."

The person addressed seemed uncourteously deaf: he made no motion to relinquish the lorgnettes through which he was gazing so eagerly; and Blanche, in some surprise, was forced to touch his invalided arm gently, before she could attract his attention. As Leo gave back the glasses, he spoke quickly and excitedly; evidently to himself rather than to his companions.

"Some one else *is* going to follow, though, Mrs Ellerslie, do watch and tell me exactly what happens. But I can make out the Chief, quite plainly; he means to have it, too. Hurrah, for the old regiment! It's hard to beat, after all."

Leo Armytage was endowed with tact and perception far beyond his years. It is probable that he had taken pretty accurate measure of the state of things that morning; had guessed at what chafed his Colonel's humour; and had felt a mischievous pride in the audacious rivalry. But all such thoughts were swallowed up, now, in honest professional sympathy: he could hardly refrain from cheering heartily and uproariously, as he had done in the last Eton and Harrow match, when his school were declared winners, with seven wickets to go down.

Laura Brancepeth's brow waxed still more cloudy as she looked down on her fascinating companion, with reproach and anger blended in her own flashing eyes.

"It's all your fault, you wicked little creature!" she said, in a discreet whisper. "The poor man was nearly wild when he rode away. I wonder whether you would care if he were drowned before your face. I don't believe you would—one bit."

Blanche instantly put on her favourite expression of injured innocence, in which she was simply inimitable.

"How very unjust of you, dear—" she murmured plaintively,

"to lay such burdens on my poor little shoulders, that can scarcely carry their own. If men *will* be mad it's not my fault. I'm sure I was perfectly civil to Colonel Vane ; but I really couldn't tempt him to stay, with that dreadful horse of his fretting so. You can't think how nervous it made me. Besides, why should he come to grief more than Lord Ranksborough? I don't see—"

She did see, though—something that sent a shiver through the cone of adamant that served her for a heart: she saw the mad rear on the bank, the horrible backward plunge, and the closing of dark swirling water over the head of Vereker Vane.

Armytage had caught the glasses as Mrs Ellerslie dropped them on her lap, and was already gazing through them earnestly. For a couple of minutes or so there was silence; broken only by an audible oath from Tony Cannell, who forgot his 'company-manners' in his surprise and concern—a concern not wholly professional. For the old horse-dealer had a certain admiration and esteem for the dashing Colonel, whom he was wont to characterize as "—a nice open-handed, free-spoken genelman as a man would wish to see, if he was a bit quick in the temper by times."

At last, said Leo Armytage—drawing a long breath, as if it were he who had been taking the dive—

"It's all right, I do believe. It's lucky those fellows were working so near. One of them has gone right in, and got hold of the bridle, as far as I can make out. Plucky clod, that—deserves to be encouraged. But I never want to see such a near shave as *that* again."

La Reine Gaillard was still too nervous to speak; and even Blanche could only assent with a slightly hysterical laugh. The three let the chase sweep away whither it would, without a second glance, and scarcely noticed Ranksborough struggling up the opposite shore; their eyes never left that group on the hither bank, till Vane had risen to his feet and climbed slowly into the saddle. Then Lady Laura turned her ponies' heads towards the gates by which they had entered; it was evident that the women, at least, of the party had had enough of hunting for that day. Indeed, throughout the rest of their drive, if the converse did not languish it was decidedly much sobered in its tone.

So Tony Cannell was left alone; with none to listen to his grumbling save the trotting mare.

"Well—if ever I see such a start as that. I can understand a swell takin' all manner of liberties with osses' necks, but when it comes to riskin' his own—Why, there's a fine genelman like the Colonel, with a fine fortin too, goes and does what our Jim never would have dreamt on. His life warn't as good as my old mother's ten minutes ago, I'll pound it. I wonder what the ladies thought of it? They took it pretty cool, considerin'—specially the little un, as they say the Colonel's sweet on. And now *you're* beginnin' to fret, old girl. Well, praps we may as well be joggin' home'ards. We'll do no more good huntin' to-day: they're goin' too straight and too quick for us cripples, I reckon."

And the scarlet wheels flashed merrily away.

There is another trio that we must follow, though two only have any concern with this tale, the third being a staid and respectable groom, who had played 'propriety' pretty often during a long service at Charteris Royal. The pair, as you may easily conceive, are no other than Flora Dorrillon and Vincent Flemyng.

The lady had avowed her intention of 'not following the hounds,' so, though they kept with the rest as far as Pinkerton Wood, neither she nor her cavalier thought it necessary to display much excitement or anxiety when the 'Gone away,' from the bottom of the cover, set the profane vulgar in a ferment. Little by little they dropped back to the skirts of the bustling crowd; till they were riding virtually alone—in the right direction perhaps, but evidently without any definite purpose. And all the while flowed on unbroken the current of low earnest talk, on subjects indifferent in themselves, but made perilously interesting to one of the speakers by subtle inflexions of manner and tone. For—mark you—a cup of fair water ceases to be harmless a second after it has been touched by one of those deft poisoners.

So they loitered on through fallow and pasture neither noticing nor caring much whither they went—all sound of chase had rolled far away—till Flora seemed to awake, as from a pleasant dream, to a vague sense of a *tête-à-tête* unconsciously prolonged;

and suggested that "they really must try and find some of the others."

In this she seemed so far serious as—in spite of Flemyng's half-plaintive remonstrances—to persist in questioning the groom as to their whereabouts. It appeared that, but a short distance ahead, ran a main-road, along which some of the carriage-folk were sure to be passing. For this they made at once at a brisk canter. But the second gate was fastened with a huge obstinate padlock; whilst the fence would barely have been practicable had the take-off been from sound turf instead of deep boggy ground. It was a very fair average 'stopper,' though the gate was only an average one, after all; not one of the ghastly white-painted barriers that are occasionally negotiated by vaulting ambition in the Shires.

Lady Dorrillon, indeed, did not seem greatly alarmed or discouraged; she merely looked inquiringly at her companion, as if waiting for him to take the initiative. If the initiative meant, giving her a lead, Vincent didn't see it in that light at all. His countenance was very rueful, as he muttered something about—"turning back; it didn't much matter, as they were in no hurry."

Even whilst Flemyng was speaking, Lady Dorrillon had turned to the groom with a very perceptible shrug of her statuesque shoulders.

"He can jump, I suppose—" she said; stroking her horse's neck carelessly.

"He can that, my lady—" was the confident reply. "But—"

Before the caution was completed Flora had caught her horse short by the head, and sent him straight at the gate. The Little Lady herself might have been proud of the performance; it was not only so boldly, but so gracefully done: the horse played his part to perfection; and the rider, neither in mid-air nor in landing, lost balance for an instant.

But Vincent Flemyng was, just then, not in a frame of mind to appreciate or admire. In truth, his was a very abnormal position; so much so, that very few men of his years have found themselves therein.

I don't mean to say that a gate—"to be taken fasting," on a

strange animal, with a rough take-off and uncertain landing—is seductive to ordinary mortals. Indeed, some of the ‘Meltonhards’ might think twice about it, if they encountered it alone. But the case is widely different when The Object is present—much more, if she hath given you a lead over the obstacle.

So, my brother, it is more than probable that for a moment you and I might have shared poor Vincent’s qualms. But eventually I think we should have bespoken ourselves much as a second-horseman, famous in High Leicestershire many seasons ago, bespoke his master.

The said master was an undaunted welter-weight. His plan was, to go sailing away, with ‘Jack’ in his wake, till his own animal was beat, when the two would exchange with marvellous rapidity. One afternoon they had run into quite a strange country, and the pair still held their own gallantly; when, just below them, appeared a very formidable brook—evidently a ‘teaser’ at the best of times, and swollen more than lip-high now.

Said the Earl—turning his head towards his henchman, as they thundered down the slope—

“Why d—e, Jack, here’s the Mediterranean!”

That faithful follower had been out of his latitude for miles past; but sooner than confess this he would have died the death. So he made answer with his wonted calm stolidity.

“I thought it was, my Lord, as we came over the hill. And a bumper it is, surelie. But—*we must have it, whether or no.*”

Most men, I repeat, on the hither side of middle age, in Flemynge’s position, would have accepted the necessity; even had their valour been, under ordinary circumstances, greatly tempered by discretion. But Vincent’s nerves were more intractable than those of Henry of Navarre, who forced himself, shivering, into the first of many fights. This was so painfully apparent, that the groom was moved to compassion, and came to the rescue.

“I wouldn’t try to ride the mare over, sir,” he said. “She’s by no means safe at timber. But she’ll lead well enough.”

It was a gross libel on poor ‘Countess’ character; yet, if the

speaker had no worse falsehoods to own, his must have been an exceptional stable-conscience.

"It will be so much the best way"—Lady Dorrillon said. "Pray don't run any risk; it is not every horse that will jump in cold blood."

There was not a tinge of sarcasm in her voice, and her manner betrayed not a shade of anxiety. But—if you could have seen her face whilst she stooped to arrange her habit, murmuring—

"Coward, too!"

So Vincent, the Countess, and the groom came over in three several detachments.

If further proof of Flora's witchery had been needed, it might have been found in the rare art with which she contrived wholly to ignore Flemyng's weakness, and to make him ignore it likewise. Any woman who has tried the experiment will tell you that it is far easier to deal with sullenness than with a sense of shame. Before they had ridden a mile, the low confidential converse was flowing on smoothly as ever; and before it was again broken off Vincent Flemyng had said words that could neither be misconstrued nor put aside. Even with female Jesuits, certain questions must now and then be brought to an issue.

But Flora attempted no evasion; she betrayed no sort of embarrassment or surprise; and the large lustrous eyes were rather pensive than angered.

"I ought to be virtuously indignant," she said, softly. "But life is too short—so is my patience—for playing propriety before a limited audience. Frankly, I'm very glad—'flattered,' I suppose, is the correct word—that you like me. I meant that you should, when we first met. Yet you must not utter another word in that strain till you have fresh leave from me. Do you know why I shut my ears? It is not because I am Marmaduke Dorrillon's wife, but because I am Marion Charteris's friend."

At first Vincent was rather disconcerted; for some allusion to the past he was prepared, but not for such sudden plain-speaking. He fairly stammered over his confused disclaimer.

"I—I assure you, you are wrong. There was nothing—she could not have told you——"

Her eyes glittered in saucy scorn.

"Don't entangle yourself in your speech," she said. "We all know that, sometimes, the whole duty of man is—to deny. But you are right, so far. Marion has told me—nothing. It is just on that account that I have formed my own conclusions. It will be difficult to shake them; you've no idea how obstinate I can be."

"How *can* I give you proofs?" he asked, plaintively. "It's so hard to prove a negative. Yet I would do anything—"

"I cannot help you. It would be too absurd for *me* to suggest, even if I cared to be convinced. I don't say, I do—mind! You will have time enough to tax your ingenuity before we talk nonsense again. See, we are close upon the carriage people. And remember; till I choose to take it off, the seal is *there*."

She just brushed his lips with her fingers; they were cool and soft enough under their casing of doeskin, and the light touch would not have waked a sleeping child. But Vincent Flemyng shivered from head to heel; as the Lady of Smaylhome may have done when the ghost's grasp scorched her to the bone.

CHAPTER XXX.

AT THE CROSS-ROADS.

BERTIE GRENVIL had pluck and hardihood enough to set up a dozen rough-riders; but he was rather delicate than robust of frame, and his two falls—the last of which happened just before the others forded the Swarle—had shaken him sorely. However, the fight was knocked out of the five-year-old as well: so he was content to plod away, soberly, homewards; whilst the Cherub nursed his discontent under the smoke of a colossal cigar.

"Isn't it my luck all over? I was in rare form for going; and I suppose they're having the run of the season. And then—I get a mount like this. Hold up, you brute! Can't you keep

your legs even on the hard road? I wish you were mine; you should sup on an ounce of lead to-night. It would be a charity to the world to put you out of it; you'll do some mischief yet before you die. Nice boy, that Hareless; so full of 'generous impulses,' and all the rest of it. I suppose this is his idea of 'putting a friend on a real good thing.' I wonder Cis is bothered with such a cross-grained cub; they'll part company before long, I fancy. What's that, yonder? Why, I do believe—"

The last words, spoken in a very different tone from the grumblings that preceded them, broke from Bertie's lips, just as an abrupt turn in the road brought him in sight of a mounted group, riding along in the slow, purposeless fashion of 'pursuers' who have utterly lost the hounds and resigned themselves to their fate. All were male figures but one. That one Grenvil knew at the first glance; though he saw not the face, but only the heavy plaits of bright fair hair, that seemed over-heavy for the trim little head and slender neck to carry.

For one moment he drew rein, as if he would have allowed the party in front to pass on without joining them. Then he struck his horse sharply with his heel, and pressed forward, muttering:

"What an idiot I am, and coward into the bargain! To have it over at once is the very best thing that could happen. I *can* hold my own to day, I think; to-morrow—who knows?"

In ten seconds more Minnie Carrington's foolish heart was beating alarums, as she welcomed the new-comer—with no intelligible words, but more significant blushes and smiles.

The damsel's father was an easy-going and something 'wattle-headed' elder. The details of domestic state-craft were never confided to him; he had only to acquiesce in his wife's diplomacy, and, so to speak, affix his official signature to whatever instruments she thought fit to present to him. He had not been present at the Torrcaster ball; and had neither watched nor been informed of Minnie's misdemeanours at Charteris Royal. So, after favouring Bertie (whom he barely recognized) with a good-humoured nod, Mr Carrington plunged overhead again into a discussion deeply interesting to himself and another squire of his own calibre, relating to the best succession of crops for fresh reclaimed land. He never noticed his daughter dropping gradu-

ally back, till an interval of some dozen yards separated her and Bertie Grenvil from the body of the small cavalcade; nor, had he been told of it, would the knowledge have troubled his honest, unsuspecting head a whit.

The Cherub seemed strangely at a loss for conversation; so Minnie, shy, was fain to give him a lead; she did this gracefully enough, if somewhat shyly, with an allusion to Bertie's soiled coat, which bore many traces of his late mishaps.

"I can see you've had one fall, if not more, Captain Grenvil. Are you sure you're not hurt? You don't know how pale you are looking. Won't you take the least drop of sherry out of my flask? I'm so glad it's full still."

She drew out from her saddle-bow the tiniest silver horn—not larger than Titania might have used for the storing of wild-flower dew—and held it out, with a pretty timid smile.

But Grenvil declined the proffer decisively, though very courteously: his tone was unnaturally cold and constrained, that, listening with closed eyes, you might have thought some elderly formalist was speaking. The effort that it cost him to bear himself thus, was surely set down on the credit side of poor Bertie's moral account; it ought to balance several items in the long black column *per contra*.

"A thousand thanks, Miss Carrington. But I need not rob you. I've my own flask out, with something stronger than sherry in it, I'm ashamed to say. And I must not rob you of your pity either, on false pretences. I'm really not the least hurt; a trifle shaken, that's all. I don't fall very heavy. I'm used to tumbling, too; for I can't afford to ride clever horses, so I take what my friends choose to lend me. They're more considerate than Hardress, as a rule, to be sure. I can't complain, either; for, bar accidents, I should hardly have come across you to-day. I didn't see you at the meet—too late, I suppose? And I should have been so sorry to have left Marlshire without bidding you good-bye. I go at the end of this week, if not sooner."

It was plain to see that Minnie was both hurt and surprised, when her simple kindness was rejected; but the white scared look came over her face only with Bertie's last words.

"Going—going so soon—and not coming back? You cannot mean it."

He broke in with a sort of fierce impatience, yet more foreign to his nature than the chill formality of his former manner.

"Stop; say nothing about the other night; and remember nothing either. It was a pleasant dream enough; but penniless reprobates like me have no right to be dreaming. Look here, Miss Carrington; I don't want to make myself out better or worse than I am. If you ever think of me at all, think of me as an unlucky devil, who never had much of a chance of becoming worthy of a good woman's love; and—threw that chance away, years ago. Yes; I'm going. It's about the best thing I can do. I don't suppose we shall meet again till long after you are married and happy, as I do hope and believe—I speak God's truth now—you will be."

She answered never a word: only by the motion of her lips Bertie guessed that she murmured to herself the one word—

"Happy!"

And all the while her great brown eyes dwelt piteously on his face, till he was fain to turn his own away. But, in spite of her girlish folly and softness of heart, there was courage in Minnie Carrington's nature. She came of a good stubborn old Saxon stock; and her pride came happily to her aid, just in time. She drove back a choking sob right bravely, and in a minute or two was able to speak almost as calmly as her own mother could have wished, only the poor little lip would keep trembling.

"You are quite right, Captain Grenvil. It will be far better to forget all about the other night—that is not forgotten already. Of course you know best if you must go. Thank you, very much, for your good wishes. I daresay I shall be as happy as my neighbours. Now, I won't tempt you out of your way, especially after your fall. That right-hand road leads to Charteris Royal, ours is straight on. Good-bye."

She pointed with her whip as she spoke. The gesture was simple and natural enough, but Bertie knew that the same thought was in both their minds just then.

Here their path divided for many a day—if not for evermore.

So those two parted—after a long, long hand-pressure—with

scarcely more outward emotion than if all the engagements for future waltzes, made on that unlucky evening at Charteris Royal, were to be duly and quickly fulfilled. In certain points of stoicism some of our delicate damsels, and curled darlings, might put Sparta to shame.

The Cherub had seldom, if ever, come out of temptation with so clear a conscience as now. Nevertheless his brow was dark with discontent, and the cloud had not lifted therefrom as he rode sharply through the park-gates of Charteris Royal. Hardress, who came to his room full of banter concerning Bertie's pleasant ride, met with a reception that astonished if it did not disconcert that astute youth.

"Don't you trust to those velvety paws of Grenvil's," Lionel used to say afterwards. "He can scratch as sharp as any of 'em, if he's stroked the wrong way up, at the wrong time."

And Minnie Carrington ranged up alongside of her father so quietly that it was some minutes before he noticed that she was there again. She was very silent during all the rest of their ride; but keener eyes than bluff Peter Carrington's might have failed to detect any sign of secret grief in the demure little maiden's face. Of stuff like hers good wives and mothers are made, and she may fairly expect her full share of sober, homely happiness. But she will be far advanced in blameless matronhood before she forgets the pang that she dissembled so gallantly that November morning.

Let us hope that the memory will teach her to be merciful to the weakness of her daughters, so that, should one of those flourishing young bay-trees show signs of branching away, she will use the pruning-knife tenderly and sparingly.

It is very instructive to remark how imperiously Duty to Society will assert itself in seasons of bitterest sorrow. You must remember the Critic's stage directions concerning Tilburina and her Confidante. They were right enough, so far as they went; but—trust me—there are differences subtler than any of mere attire between the mourning of mistress and maid.

If Elspeth or Effie are jilted by their uncouth lovers, the poor peasant girls may bewail their virginity as loudly as they will, with rending of lint-white locks, and copious tears, and gusty

sobbing. But when Lord Thomas breaks troth, Fair Annet must play the high-born damsel even to the woeful end.

Come to my bower, my maidens,
And dress my bonny brown hair ;
Where'er ye laid one plait before,
Look ye lay nine times mair.

You may hear the clear sweet 'lilt' ringing through the long vaulted gallery—faultless melody as ever was swan-song. Soon, Annet shall ride forth, in all her brave attire—the silver horse-bells chiming blithely with 'each tift of the southern wind'—to the wedding that ought to have been her own.

And who would guess that, under the brodered bodice, throbs a heart-ache so terrible, that it will be kindly cruelty when the nut-brown bride drives the sharp bodkin home ?

CHAPTER XXXI.

L'ANDALOUSE.

You see the famous Pinkerton day was of import to others besides the staunch old fox, whose death has been recorded ; and fertile in other incidents besides those of flood and field.

From these last to Ranksborough, perhaps, accrued the most profit and renown. For Marion Charteris had witnessed his daring from afar, with much fear and trembling : even so the dames who sate around Rowena may have looked down on *Le Noir Fainéant* hurling through the lists at Ashby. She did an inordinate quantity of hero-worship in the course of the next forty-eight hours.

Marlshire was too well used to Seyton's prowess in saddle to make a fuss about any singular instance thereof, and the Little Lady took the thing in such a quiet matter-of-course way, that somehow nobody thought of congratulating her. Neither did Vereker Vane reap much honour from his hair-breadth escape

(unsuccessful rashness is so very nearly ridiculous) save amongst his own subalterns, who watched their chief that night with intense admiration, whilst he solaced his bruised carcase with drink copious and strong. When he next met Mrs Ellerslie, thus spake the fair widow.

“Colonel Vane, I really think you ought to re-christen that dangerous horse of yours. His name is almost a libel as it stands. I ought to know something of the Plungers, considering what regiment my husband commanded. In my time they were steady respectable people, as a rule; not at all given to violence and evil tempers; quite models indeed, for—the light cavalry.”

And Blanche smiled a cold provocative smile, such as may have dwelt on the lip of De Lorge’s mistress, when she saw her glove plucked from the lion’s den, and wist not of the insult to come. She need scarcely have feared such requital now-a-days; men have waxed, since then, less sharp of wit, or less stout of heart.

The day following on the events chronicled above was rather a lazy one at Charteris Royal. All the morning people lounged or strolled about, according to their tastes or purposes; it was not till after an early luncheon that a general sally was made to shoot some small covers just outside the gardens. It is unnecessary to say that nearly all the women turned out as spectators; each attaching herself to the fortunes of a particular gun.

I rather wonder that no enthusiast of the Bright-Robotham school has taken up his parable against this fashion, which has taken root among us of comparatively late years. It is so seldom that those blatant fanatics let a chance slip of discourteously entreating a bloated aristocracy. To be sure, it is not probable that any such could have testified, from eye-witness, against the scandal.

Most shooters will own to feeling rather nervous, the first time they have to perform before a bevy of bright-eyed critics; but, when this has worn off, a grateful dash of excitement pervades the after-proceedings. Pleasant it is to watch the interest—not to say animosity—displayed by the fair scorers; how jealously they will claim a doubtful bird: sometimes

hardly to be checked in their partisanship by such a whispered confession as—"I didn't shoot at it; indeed I wasn't loaded." Nor is their amusement spoiled, as a rule, by any squeamish scruples concerning blood-shedding. Yet to this there are certain exceptions. I had the honour, not long ago, of meeting a charming humanitarian; who—being compelled to watch a hot corner—attached herself to the very worst shot of the party (he has carried missing to an incredible pitch of perfection), upon the principle that "she didn't like to see anything killed."

Will you fancy the poor gentleman's face, if you please, listening to those frank and simple words?

On the present occasion the guns out-numbered the scorers; so that these last were fain to distribute themselves as discreetly as they could. The head-keeper knew his business right well; and—knowing his men too for the most part—posted them accordingly. The first line was formed about forty yards from the edge of the cover: further back still, was a rear-guard of four; in this stood Ranksborough, Seyton, Castlemaine, and Dorrillon.

For the first two, you may guess who scored. Lady Alice Langton took Cecil in charge; Sir Marmaduke, strange to say, was waited on by—his own wife.

Yet it was not so strange, after all. Flora looked with an artist's eye on all feats of physical strength or dexterity; it did not amuse her, a whit, to watch clumsiness or incapacity at work. So, when Vincent Flemyng avowed that—"he only took a gun for the form of the thing,"—she gave him up for the nonce, without hesitation; and came to watch her husband's performance, just as she might have watched some skilful billiard-player.

Sir Marmaduke's triumph was almost painful to witness. His worn face lighted up, and his sunken eyes flashed out, and his bent shoulders straightened themselves gallantly; till you began to realise what manner of man *le beau Dorrillon* of the Regency must have been. His hands trembled so at first, that his loader nearly offered to relieve him of his gun. But he soon collected himself. Though he had all his life been a

famous performer, he never shot more superbly. Every minute he waxed more chirping and cheerful, till at last he chuckled gleefully.

"Look at that cock, my lady"—he would say. "He's a *leetle* too high for John Charteris; but just about *our* distance, I fancy."

And down would tumble the rocketeer, yards behind them, with the dull heavy thud of a bird that leaves its life in the air.

But all the four in that rear-warl rank were artists; and each man was shooting his very best, though without a particle of jealousy. The veteran head-keeper—not usually lavish of praise—was wont to be almost enthusiastic whilst speaking of that afternoon's work.

"It were about the neatest practice that ever I see. Squire Seyton had a trifle the best of it; the wind turned 'em a bit his way. But Sir Marmaduke ran him main hard. And warn't the old gentleman pleased, neither?"

"A pretty show, Woodgate," he says to me, just arter we'd got thro' the Round Clump—"a very pretty show. And, Woodgate—her ladyship hasn't paid her footing yet; we always do it in our country."

"And he slips something into my hand: blessed if it warn't a ten-pun note! We've had a Dook or two here in my time, and lords as plenty as blackberries. But none on 'em ever came down as handsome as that. He's a rare good sort, is the baronet; and there ain't many of 'em can touch him, though he *du* stick to muzzle-loaders. And as for my lady—I never see the woman yet that was fit to hold a candle to her, for looks."

John Charteris rejoiced, in his stolid fashion, that his covers had well maintained their reputation; taking not the faintest credit to himself for the sport that had been shown. On the whole, the afternoon proved satisfactory to all concerned, with, perhaps, the single exception of Flemyng.

Though every one seemed to be too busily engaged to notice his individual performance, Vincent was conscious of having burnt an absurd amount of powder, with no results worth speaking of. Therefore he was possessed with the vague envious

discontent common even among novices. Without being himself vain-glorious, or having made boast beforehand, it is not agreeable to serve as a palpable foil to the excellence of others. Besides this, he was tantalised unendurably by Lady Dorrillon's bearing towards him. To say that he had not gained an inch of ground since her hand touched his lips, is nothing. He had literally not been allowed to murmur a single confidential word in her ear during the last twenty-four hours. She had contrived to evade him, without any marked avoidance or expressed warning; and this state of things seemed likely to continue.

When the party went back to the house Flora retreated to her own rooms; and did not show again till just before dinner was announced. Her dress and ornaments were always in perfect taste, but that night they chanced—if chance it were—to be specially becoming to her peculiar style. As she swept up the long state drawing-room, more than one eye noted this that had long been familiar with her beauty. Even Hardress' thin sluggish blood was slightly stirred, as her rustling skirts brushed his foot in passing.

"She *is* infernally handsome"—he muttered.

A coarse epithet; yet, perchance, there was more truth in it than the speaker was aware of.

All through dinner Flem yng sate like one in a trance; with his eyes riveted on Lady Dorrillon, who sent back no answering signal. He talked a good deal in a fitful random way; and ate a morsel or two, now and then. All the while he was drinking deep—very unusually so for him; for intemperance was not one of Vincent's vices. Yet the liquor did not seem to have any effect on his brain. Though his blood was boiling, his face grew paler, if anything, instead of flushing. He had never in his life been so ripe for any kind of mischief as when he rose, with the other men, to join the women in the drawing-room.

Here, again, he was foiled, so far as any attempts at love-passages were concerned. The places near Lady Dorrillon were so fully occupied, that without absolute rudeness he could scarcely have made his way to her side. Just when Flem yng thought he saw an opening, Flora rose—with the resigned air

of one who thinks it less trouble to yield than to resist long pleading—and moved indolently towards the open piano.

A murmur of satisfaction ran audibly through the room; for her talents, vocal and musical, were of a very rare order, and perhaps were more valued from their being so seldom exercised. But the lady was in a specially benevolent humour that evening. Though she indulged her audience with no ‘show-piece’ whatever—the *bravura* was her mortal aversion—her lithe fingers discoursed strangely sweet music as they strayed dreamily over the keys; and her glorious voice thrilled through every ear that listened, as it rose and fell in the cadences of some quiet ballad or ancient serenade.

At last, after a brief pause, she struck a few brilliant chords and suddenly, as if moved by some reckless impulse, dashed into the opening verse of *L’Andalouse*.

Avez-vous vu dans Barcelone,
Une Andalouse au sein bruni?
Pâle, comme un beau soir d’automne?
C’est ma maîtresse, ma lionne,
La marquesa d’Amægui.

Few that have heard that famous song worthily rendered will ever be likely to forget it. I think it stands unmatched for weird passionate melody; whilst over all there lies an ominous shadow, like a black veil drawn across a scarlet vestment; somehow we feel that the romance needs must come to an evil ending, even if the love won at the sword’s point be not cut short by the dagger.

It was an expurgated version that she sang, for several words were altered, and two verses left out. Nevertheless, with all her daring, Lady Dorrillon would scarcely have ventured on it in a mixed society. Here she was tolerably sure of not scandalising her audience, though she could hardly have reckoned on taking them so completely by storm. Truly, as the last of the rich full notes died away, there were not many pulses in that room that kept regular time. Even Tom Seyton, to whom French and Hebrew were about the same, felt his honest brown face flushing; and John Charteris, in the midst of a most interesting agricultural controversy, utterly lost the

thread of his argument. But Kate—as little of a prude as any woman alive—looked nervously distressed; and Lady Alice Langton's clear blue eyes rested on the songstress in cold disapproval, not unmingled with disdain.

Needless to say that the malcontents were quite unnoticed amidst the general applause; very seldom, indeed, in modern society would you see or hear such natural enthusiasm as prevailed for several minutes in the state drawing-room of Charteris Royal.

Lady Dorrillon took it all with remarkable coolness, and was firm in her refusal to touch another note; but she could never fairly extricate herself from the group of her admirers till the appointed hour came for the women's retiring.

If indifferent hearers were so strongly moved, you may guess how it fared with Vincent Flemmyng. Such a tumult of passion as was seething within him just then it would not be easy, nor perhaps profitable, to paint in black and white. The Seytons went back to Warleigh that night, for Tom had home engagements on the morrow. Kate actually started as her brother's hand touched her own when they parted; it was hot and hard as half-cooled metal, yet quickened with a sort of convulsive tremor. She was going to speak warningly and anxiously when Vincent broke abruptly away, as if determined to avoid any parley or question. She was very near taking counsel of Tom during their long homeward drive; but he was too sleepy to make an agreeable confidant. They had both seen that all danger from Marion Charteris was over; and Kate had not the heart to tease her husband, just at present, with any fresh misgivings. Besides, since Vincent's return, it had become only too plain that he meant to go his own wilful way, without let or hindrance from his nearest and dearest.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IMPAR CONGRESSUS.

WHEN Flemyng went to his own chamber, he had no intention of joining the other men in the smoking-room. But before he had been there five minutes, he felt that any company would be better than his own: in his present frame of mind solitude and silence were simply unendurable; so he changed his dress quickly, and descended to the *tabagie*.

"That's rather lucky"—Hardress said, as Vincent entered. "Here's a fifth, at all events; though the Commissioner has gone to bed with a head-ache. We needn't play the set rubber, that you hate so much, Castlemaine. It will do very well; the outsider is sure to have his bet. You won't mind fives and ponies, Flemyng?"

Vincent could almost have embraced the speaker. The counter-excitement of high-play was the only anodyne that could possibly touch the morbid irritation of his nerves; it was the very one he would himself have sought: besides, he had not had a real 'flutter for months, and the gambling-thirst was strong upon him. So he assented eagerly, and the rubber began at once, Ranksborough and Grenvil making up the table.

John Charteris betook himself to his rest so soon as he had seen his guests comfortably settled to their play, with all manner of drinks ready to their hand. The worthy man never in his life wagered more than silver on any one event (you may see him at Homburg sometimes, putting down a five-franc piece after intense calculation, with much wrinkling of brows); but large sums have been lost and won under his roof, if not in his presence, without his steady-going conscience being troubled a whit. The luck went tolerably evenly for awhile; far too evenly to satisfy Flemyng, whose spirit still chafed fiercely within him; though it must be owned that other passions began

rapidly to give place to the meaner lust of gold. Yet he won steadily, if not largely.

With the exception of Castlemaine, who was nearly first-class, they were very fairly matched. Hardress played wonderfully for his years; carrying, as might be expected, *finesse* to a fault: Flemyng's was a showy third-rate game, though he was apt to sacrifice his partner's hand to his own; the other two were a shade worse than he, when they paid attention to the cards; which was not always.

At last Flemyng cut with Castlemaine: their adversaries were Hardress and Ranksborough; the two former having the deal.

Now, if ever, seemed to Vincent the time to 'plunge.' In point of play he certainly had the best of it (for Castlemaine was a tower of strength); and, so far, the cards had stood to him very steadily. Besides, though all idea of rivalry was dead, he hated the dark languid face over against him as bitterly as ever. The two had scarcely exchanged a dozen words, and these of the most trivial import; but overt insolence would have been a lighter aggravation than Ranksborough's cool fashion of putting the other quietly into the background, if he did not absolutely ignore his presence. Flemyng knew that the impassible serenity, which in himself was artificial if not affected, was an integral part of Denzil's nature: he envied him this, no less than the bodily prowess and reckless courage that were ever ready at need. There was as much of personal pique, as of the gambling spirit, in his challenge.

"Wait a second, Mr Castlemaine; don't turn up, yet. I've a fancy on this rubber; and I'll take any bets that are offered."

"Not a bad fancy either,"—Hardress said with a sneer. "You've got the deal, and one of the best players in Europe as your partner. I can't gratify you with level money; I'll take a shade of odds though."

Now Ranksborough was by no means an habitual gambler, but he had periodical fits of high play; and in one way he was especially dangerous; a 'pony,' coming out of his listless lips, sounded just like a 'fiver' out of another man's. Of this

peculiarity in his opponent Vincent was not aware; so that he was rather taken aback by Denzil's quiet rejoinder.

"If you want to gamble, Mr Flemyng, I won't baulk you. Hardress may do as he likes. I'll lay you an even 'monkey' on the rubber, and lay or take the odds to the sets; that is five hundred to two, of course. Will that suit you?"

If any other man alive than Ranksborough had spoken, Flemyng—even in his present temper—would assuredly have hesitated; if he had not declined the bet altogether. As it was, he closed with it at once. Cis Castlemaine made no observation; only arching his thick grey eyebrows, meaningly.

"I suppose you won't care for any more?" the Cherub murmured meekly, behind Flemyng's shoulder. "If you do, there's my humble fifty. I rather fancy the others this time."

"Yes, I'll take it;" Vincent said—having once taken the 'header' he was utterly desperate. "Then you won't have anything in, Hardress?"

"Well; I suppose I must have a level hundred, if you won't lay odds—" the other grumbled. "Why don't you ask Castlemaine if he'd like to have some of it. You seem to be pretty greedy this time."

"Don't trouble yourself about me—" Cis answered, gravely.

"And don't apologise, Mr Flemyng. I never alter my stakes, as Lionel ought to know by this time. We're about as much as we can carry, I think. Shall I turn the card?"

It was an honour: Vincent held two more on his own hand, and they won the first game right off.

"I've the privilege of laying the long odds then—" Flemyng said, with a feverish gaiety that was not all assumed: he really did feel very confident. "Hardress; you'd better have a hundred to forty."

The boy shook his head sulkily: but Bertie—infected with the gambling virus, and facile as usual before temptation, 'jumped on' and booked the bet.

Now, by one of the curious coincidences that happen only at cards, the second hand was almost a counterpart of the first.

Vincent held the knave and four more trumps. If he had only gone off with that suit, the game was over: he would have

led through king, second, on his left, up to Castlemaine's ace and queen. True, he had not a powerful playing hand; yet he might have given his partner credit for *something*. But one of the weakest—if not the worst—points in Flemyng's character was this, he never could trust either friend or foe. So he led off with his own strongest suit, which was trumped by Hardress, the second round: Castlemaine, at length, was forced to lead up to the king; and the critical fifth trick was just barely saved.

"A very close thing—" mutters Bertie Grenvil; drawing a long breath. "Too close to be pleasant."

The others were silent, till Flemyng said,

"I ought to have led trumps: there's no doubt of it."

He looked at his partner as he spoke; but the latter answered never a word, till Vincent repeated the question pointedly. It has been before stated that Castlemaine's manner—especially towards men whom he favoured not—was somewhat solemn and formal.

"It has been computed"—he said, very slowly—"that eleven thousand Englishmen, once heirs to fair fortunes, are wandering about the Continent, in a state of utter destitution, because—they would not lead trumps, with five, and an honour, in their hands."

The ultra-judicial tone of the reply would have been irresistibly comic at any other time; now, only Hardress's jarring laugh was heard. At any other time, too, it is probable that Flemyng would have taken offence at being so sharply schooled. But—he was dealing at the moment—he was over-borne by that faint nervous shrinking which often comes before great disaster; like the cold 'sough' that brings the black rain-cloud down apace.

The presage was very quickly fulfilled. "Whist seldom forgives—" they say; and on this night, the rare indulgence was not to be shown. Thenceforward Castlemaine or his partner scarcely held a winning card; the others landed the long odds, without the semblance of a struggle.

For several seconds after the deciding trick was played, Flemyng sat like one stunned, or dreaming. A dull heavy

droning filled his ears; and the figures round the table seemed blurred, and distorted, and unnaturally large. At last, he began to realise that some one was talking about 'points;' and he broke out into a short unnatural laugh. As if points could possibly signify! Then he heard Ranksborough's deep monotonous voice, asking—

"If he wished to have his revenge?"

Of course he did! Could there be a question about it? As they sate.

Then Castlemaine spoke—very gravely, but not unkindly now:—

"If you would like my advice, Mr Flemyng, you would accept your losses, for to-night, heavy as they are; and claim your revenge to-morrow. I tell you fairly, I don't think you are in form just now for playing such stakes. It don't matter much to Ranksborough, or Hardress, whether they win or lose. But it's different with you and me. We've got the money against us, if not the talent; and that weight *will* tell. If you are bent on going on, I'll do my best to pull you through, I need hardly say. But I shall play the points only, with no bet on the rubber; and this must be the last. I can't afford to be Quixotic; and I have lost already as much as I care to lose."

Though Cis did not like, or even greatly compassionate, his unlucky partner, he really did mean well by his warning.

You may guess how much it availed. Flemyng went in again, with a blind savage energy; his bets with Ranksborough and Grenvil were the same as before, but with Hardress they were more than trebled. That keen wolf-cub was only too ready to claim his share of the 'real good thing' that he now scented on the wind.

The result may easily be imagined; indeed, it never was practically in doubt. The second rubber was won by Ranksborough much more easily than the first: the only difference being, that the short, instead of the long, odds were landed.

But on this occasion Flemyng betrayed an extraordinary discomposure. From the moment that he knew, with the gambler's unerring instinct, that this second loss was inevitable, a sort of numbness possessed him; he felt no shock or pain

when the deciding blow was dealt. Neither did he try to induce his adversaries to give him another chance of retrieving himself. Indeed he showed so much calmness and temper, whilst adding up and verifying the scores, that every man present thought better of Flemyng from that moment—saving always Lionel Hardress; who, as he turned away to light a last cigarette, might have been heard to mutter discontentedly—

“Takes it a d—d sight too coolly. Shouldn’t wonder if we had to wait for our money.”

But the amiable Tout was all abroad in his suspicions; Flemyng did fully intend to meet his engagements, though he had lost enough that night to cripple, if not to beggar him for life. Therefore it did him the more credit that he was enabled to preserve that outward serenity till Grenvil had bidden him good-night at the door of his own chamber, with a few words of really sincere condolence; and he was fairly locked in.

Then there came a re-action which—for the honour of manhood—shall not be described here.

When the paroxysm had spent itself, Vincent felt so unutterably weak and weary, that he only cared to sleep; sleep at all hazards, or at any price he would have. He took morphine out of a travelling-case that held six small phials; and infused some in water, with a hand that trembled overmuch for safe medicining.

“It don’t matter,” he muttered, when he lost count of the drops as they fell. But the quantity chanced to be only sufficient to cast him into a deep dreamless slumber, which lasted till nearly noon.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

QUID PRO QUO.

THE sun broke bright and clear through the half-drawn curtains, as Flemyng woke; a cloudless winter sun, such as would tempt almost any man out to hard or healthy exercise afield.

But Vincent only turned away his heavy eyes with a curse. Nearly the same syllables had been last on his lips when sleep overcame him. His brain was confused at first: but soon the full memory of last night's disaster came back with that quick sickening rush that all thorough-paced gamblers must have known twice or thrice in their time. He stretched out his hand and took up a scrap of paper lying on a marble table close to his bed; one glance at the figures written thereon seemed quite enough; he buried his head in the pillow with a shudder and a groan.

Nevertheless, Flemyng felt the necessity of bestirring himself. It would never do for people to think that his losses had unmanned him; lying helpless there would not help him to pay them; neither would ruin be made lighter by ridicule. So he rang his bell, and proceeded to make a careful toilette, with decent outward composure; first bracing his nerves with a cup of black coffee, and a refresher of unusual potency.

After that same morning draught Vincent's ideas were turned into another channel; and, ere long, the remorse of the night was well-nigh swallowed up in the doubts of the morning. He began to think—how Flora Dorrillon would take all the news which she was sure to hear sooner or later, if she had not done so already? He felt quite sure of her pity; moreover, he cherished some vague hope that the gravity of his disaster might give him a certain grandeur in her eyes; and perchance she might set down his desperation to the right cause. It happens not to every one to risk such a stake as he had lost, and there must be an end to a run of ill-luck after all; besides, the proverb about Love and Play does, at odd times, come true. It was very like the man—wilfully to ignore the fact, that the first great *coup* was lost entirely by his own fault, and that Fortune had not been cruel till her favours had been cast away.

However, a certain amount of self-delusion, aiding his overweening self-conceit, brought Flemyng into a tolerably confident frame of mind again. He resolved to try conclusions, in earnest, with Lady Dorrillon that day. If he could only checkmate, or even bring her into a great strait, he felt that he could accept almost cheerfully the losses at the other game.

Stronger evidence of Flora's witchery could scarcely be found than in the dominion she had established over such a nature as this. Shallow, selfish, unstable, to a degree—Flemyng was yet as thoroughly engrossed by his guilty passion, and as capable of sacrificing all earthly considerations thereto, as the most heroic mortal that ever has given up heart and soul to a blameless honourable love.

When his servant had left the room, Vincent unlocked his despatch-box, and took a small packet from a secret drawer.

"She wants proof, does she?" he said, between his teeth. "She shall have it, by G—d. What an idiot I was not to have thought of this trumpery before."

He thrust the papers hastily into a breast-pocket, and went down-stairs straightway, for the luncheon-gong was even then sounding.

He found that all the men, with the exception of Colonel Langton and de Visme (whose suppressed gout was still troublesome) had gone forth a couple of hours before to shoot a distant cover. There was nothing extraordinary in this. Though so much had been done over-night, it had not been a specially late sitting; nor were its incidents likely to affect any one strongly save the principal loser. None of those concerned, with the exception of Hardress, were particularly merciless or uncharitable. Living the life they did—it was much the same with them as with those who rode in front of the famous 'Quarterly' run with the Quorn: their best friend might be in desperate grief, on their left or right, but—"the pace was too good to inquire." Neither were any of last night's winners likely to be garrulous, about good or evil fortune betiding themselves or others.

Nevertheless, as Vincent made his morning salutations with a very fair grace, he felt perfectly certain that nearly every woman present was aware of his unprosperous 'plunge.' Marion Charteris' manner was much kinder than it had been of late (for a coldness had undoubtedly sprung up between them); in Alice Langton's earnest gaze there was a sort of compassionate curiosity; and Flora Dorrillon's eyes were eloquent enough to satisfy even Flemyng, as she beckoned him to a place at her side, murmuring, as their fingers met—

"How could you be so rash? I'm really ashamed of you."

Now all this was rather comforting than otherwise; and Vincent's moral barometer began to rise rather rapidly. He consumed a very fair portion of the dainties set before him; and talked a little in the calm subdued tones of one supporting some wholly undeserved misfortune with constancy.

As they rose from luncheon, a low vibrating voice, just discreetly avoiding a whisper, said in his ear—

"I mean to do the gardens thoroughly this bright afternoon. Would you like to play *cicerone*? You must know the ground so well. You *would* like it? Then, you might meet me in the lower conservatory."

Thither Flemyng betook himself, in much perturbation of spirit, it must be owned. Now that the opportunity he had sought so eagerly was certainly near, he did not feel quite sure whether he were glad or no. Those unhappy 'nerves' of his were always asserting themselves just at the wrong moment.

Whilst he waited at the trysting-place, his heart kept beating with a quick irregular throbbing that was physically painful; and he was forced to throw away a cigarette before it was a quarter consumed; the smoke fairly choked him. But he waited not long, before Lady Dorrillon appeared on the topmost of the three flights of steps leading down from the upper to the lower conservatories.

Perhaps, in all her life Flora had never looked more perilously tempting than she did at that moment, when after a moment's hesitation she came down the marble stairs, swiftly, but with no unbecoming haste; never losing that strange undulating motion that—with other attributes—certain women have stolen from the Serpent.

Her attire, too, was so artistically chosen, from the trim hat almost smothered in soft grebe's plumage, down to the channelled heels of the wonderful balmorals—serviceable, though so daintily wrought.

No fault to find in that outer garment, of blackest velvet trimmed with blue fox-fur—just the patrol jacket for the Life-Guards of an Amazonian Queen; nor in those braided festoons of violet *moire*, looped up over a quilted silken kirtle to match;

no fault, certainly, with those delicate hosen, of the same colour, somewhat lighter in hue; whose brilliant 'clocks' throw into ravishing relief the symmetry of the exquisite ancle, whereof we catch liberal glimpses from our station below.

It was just the figure, in whose fore-shortening poor John Leech would have revelled; and to which no other could render justice. Not in this generation, I think, shall the painter arise, able to wield the pencil that dropped from those deft fingers, all too soon.

Vincent's nervous hesitations were cured instantly and efficaciously, as faintness is cured by a draught of some rare cordial. Before the lady reached his side, he was ready to dare to the uttermost, rather than leave his fate longer in abeyance. When Flora asked him—with a mischievous smile—"if he was not almost tired of waiting?" he felt so strongly tempted to snatch the slender fingers (whose grey-kid casing just showed beyond the border of a distracting little muff) and wring them hard, by way of answer, that a vague fear of making himself prematurely ridiculous, was scarce enough to deter him. He did refrain himself, however; and they had walked some steps into the keen outer-air before Flora spoke again, in a graver tone than Vincent had ever heard her use.

"Would you mind telling me all that happened last night? Indeed I don't ask from mere curiosity. I felt sure something had gone wrong when you did not appear at breakfast; and I asked Lord Ranksborough. He only said in his slow, listless way—how I hate it!—that 'the secrets of the smoking-room were sacred.' Afterwards, I got Bertie Grenvil to confess that there had been some very heavy whist, and that you were the chief sufferer. But he would not tell me how much you had lost. Will you?"

He named the amount with an indifference that did him credit; possibly, it was not all acted; at that moment, money-troubles might have seemed to him of no more account than floating thistle-down.

Lady Dorrillon could not repress a slight start.

"So much as that?" she murmured. "What fearful rashness! I am so very, very sorry. And so will Marion be when she knows it. Only fancy—its happening under *her* roof!"

Thus far Flemyng had been walking with his eyes bent steadfastly downwards ; he raised them now, and looked Flora in the face, with unwonted courage.

"We had better leave Mrs Charteris's name out altogether ; don't you think so ? I can't pretend to care much for her compassion. But I am very glad *you* are sorry. You ought to be—a little. I should never have been so mad, if you had spared me ten kind words—ay, or even ten kind looks—all through that weary yesterday."

She laughed her own low musical laugh, that could rob even sarcasm of its sting.

"I wonder if there is any earthly mischance or misdemeanour that men will not lay on our poor frail shoulders. Mine ought to be bowed with their burden." (How shapely looked their statuesque slope just then !) "I thought it was only prudent and proper to stand on ceremony a little after our long *tête-à-tête* ride. One must sacrifice to conventionality now and then, you know. But I had no idea of the sacrifice turning out so costly—if it was really as you say. It is hard to believe it though, that it was *all* my fault."

"Don't suppose I mean to reproach you," he answered hurriedly. "Or, if I did when I spoke of being desperate, I was complaining of the cause—not the effect : that's not worth a second thought. 'Hard to believe.' Ah ! if I could only make you less hard of belief, I could forget worse ruin than fell on me last night."

"And suppose I wanted to be convinced ?" — the sweet earnest voice said. "It is rather tiresome—being always on one's guard. I told you frankly, the other day—too frankly of course—why I could not listen. You have done nothing since to shake my scruples, or prejudices, or pride : the name matters nothing."

"I had little opportunity," Vincent retorted. "But I own I was stupid enough not to think, till this morning, of the weapon that lay close to my hand. I feel no shame in using it. I don't know what shame means where *you* are concerned." (That last romantic limitation was rather useless.) "Will you halt here for five minutes ? It will not take you longer to test my sincerity."

They had turned several angles of thick evergreen shrubbery ; and were now in a path rarely frequented, albeit sunny and pleasant enough ; for it led away from the flower-beds and more attractive part of the plaisance, towards a side-gate into the walled gardens. The spot was absolutely screened from any windows in the house ; and about as safe a one as could have been chosen for out-door confidences.

Vincent Flemyng laid one hand, not over-lightly, on the slender wrist, where it issued from the fur ; with the other he drew from his breast-pocket the packet that you saw him place there.

“ You doubted how far my *liaison* with Marion Charteris had gone,” he said. “ Will these convince you ? As I hope to be saved—bah ! that’s a weak oath—as I hope to win *you*—there is every line she ever wrote me. You may look over the others at your leisure : you’ll find none like that one with the Genoa post-mark ; and on that one I’m content to rest my cause.”

Flora Dorrillon would not have been so dangerous a creature, if to her strong passion and wayward recklessness had not been added a rare power of self-control : not more than thrice, perhaps, in her life had this failed her, when its exercise was needful to save her credit or cover her retreat. Nevertheless, it cost her no slight effort now so to discipline her face, as to prevent the betrayal of any outward satisfaction or triumph. The coolest of chess-players might be excused for showing a tempered exultation after the winning of a difficult match ; wherein all his combinations had worked on in smooth unison towards the complete final victory.

Flora’s quick eye lighted on the Genoa post-mark, even before Vincent disengaged that letter from the rest ; but she did not open the envelope ; and stood for a full minute, as if irresolute how to act.

“ It’s almost a shame to read Marion’s confessions. I could not do so—with you standing by. It seems so—I hardly know what it seems. Yet I did bring this on myself, I own.”

“ I’ll take all the blame, now and hereafter,” Vincent broke in. “ Only *do* read. You can’t refuse, after what you said. It would be such cruel trifling.”

She smiled demurely and deprecatingly.

"I should be no woman, if I held out longer. Any other temptation than curiosity, please; and curiosity about one's best friend's failings! I will read a few lines; just to keep you quiet—you are so terribly impetuous to-day. But I can't possibly do so unless you set my unhappy wrist free. Thanks; that is better. Now, point out the passages I am to look at, and then turn your head away."

Vincent did as he was bidden, duteously. Otherwise, he might have been somewhat puzzled by the varying expression of his companion's face, as she studied—or affected to study—the record of Marion Charteris' folly. There was the strangest mingling, or swiftest succession, of careless pity and mischievous amusement.

"I won't keep you in suspense," she said, at last. "If that is the worst of the 'pieces of accusation,' the verdict of the court is—'Not guilty.'—I believe that it *is* the worst. I'll just glance at the rest of the notes—*l'appétit vient en mangeant*, you know—when I am alone. Every scrap shall be burnt to-night; you will trust me thus far? So you have leave to plead, and I am bound to listen. I don't promise that you will prevail. The world has said some hard things of me; I don't think it ever said that I was easily won. But you shall have a fair field, without let or hindrance from others; and thereto I plight my troth."

She held out her gloved right hand with an imperial grace—there is queenliness even in coquetry—and accepted the homage of Flemyng's lips thereon without a shadow of coyness or embarrassment. But, under the rain of passionate kisses, the strong healthy pulses of the delicate wrist never quickened a whit; and Vincent might have abated somewhat of his delirious triumph. Could he have seen how firmly the fingers of the other hand closed round the letters that had just been bought and sold.

Lady Dorrillon freed herself, at last, gently but very decidedly.

"Do be reasonable," she said, with the slightest shade of impatience. "The Chloe and Corydon style is utterly out of date. Now-a-days, if two people understand one another it is quite enough. You will have plenty of time for special-pleading; it would savour too much of set formality, now—a sort of necessity of the position. You can be reasonable, you know, without

being cross or looking injured. I really have something serious to say to you. It is easier to say than it was five minutes ago."

Nevertheless, she hesitated; and allowed Vincent to walk on several steps by her side in silence—wearing, it is unnecessary to remark, a plaintive air of suppressed devotion; as if his raptures were with difficulty restrained, in deference to her capricious commands.

"I want to speak about last night," Lady Dorrillon said. "I think I should have spoken even if—well—never mind the 'ifs.' I don't profess to be acquainted with your resources. But I know, very, very few men have two or three thousands lying at their bankers. I won't be interrupted; it is my will to have my say out and it is too early for you to rebel. Of course you'll have to go to your lawyer: every one does under the circumstances. *Ah! je connais mon monde.* Now, I want you to go to *mine* instead. You have no idea what a pleasant person he is to deal with; especially if you take him a tiny note from me. Will you do this?"

It has been shown, ere this, that Vincent Flemyng had never been much fettered with delicacy, and, of late, had grown strangely dull to any sense of shame. But, where Flora Dorrillon was concerned his whole nature seemed temporarily altered. A cavalier of the nicest honour could not have interpreted the lady's suggestion more acutely, nor have answered more becomingly, than he; though his tone might have been less sullen and cold.

"I guess what you mean, of course. It pains me exceedingly to be obliged to refuse your first request, or reject your first advice. I am just as grateful as if I had accepted both. But I have no choice but to decline. If I could act otherwise I should be still more unworthy of you than I am. No; I am not yet come so low, that I should borrow, even from *you*, to pay my debts of honour."

He spoke sincerely enough; yet it is probable that he felt a certain pride in his self-denial, and, as it were, wrapped himself in dignity, as he delivered his *tirade*. If so, he must have been sorely disconcerted by the manner of its reception. There was

no anger in Lady Dorrillon's face; but a disdain, so intense, that it well-nigh verged on pity.

"Is not that like a man," she said in a bitter suppressed voice—"the real conventional man of our good nineteenth century? You would move heaven and earth to compass my dishonour, if not my ruin in the world's eyes, and accept that sacrifice freely. But you scruple about accepting a kindness that I would offer to Bertie Grenvil, or any other old friend, just as readily as I offered it to you. Deep self-devotion—is it not?—to ask you to use two or three of the thousands that I have not a notion what to do with, till I may happen to want them? And that is your idea of love. Will you hear mine? Any woman, worthy of the name, would give the bracelets from her wrists and the rings from her fingers, to be staked at the hazard-table, if Play were her only rival; and her lover would not think her less beautiful without her jewels. Ah me—only to know such love as that—*again!*"

Lower and lower her voice had sunk, till the last word was utterly lost in a long passionate sigh; and the speaker turned hastily away, hiding with one hand her averted eyes. Truly, there was wondrous little of acting here.

It is not hard to imagine how this sudden outbreak of emotion affected Vincent Flemynge, who had never dreamt of the like as possible in his haughty mistress. The incoherent string of protestations and excuses which he poured forth with feverish volubility is certainly not worth transcribing. Of course, he accepted everything, with blind submissive gratitude.

"He would do anything she wished, if she would only," &c., &c.

Lady Dorrillon recovered her composure before the wordy torrent was in mid-course; she did not interrupt the orator till he was fairly out of breath; but she would not allow a fresh flood-gate to be opened.

"That is enough. I don't want you to 'swear by earth and sea and sky,' but only to be reasonable and amiable. I'm so glad it is settled so. It is a real pleasure to be able to help you; and there need not be the slightest difficulty about it. I will tell you what to do in the course of the evening. And

don't be so rash again. You have not the same excuse, you know. Now, you shall take me in. I am not equal to lionizing all the gardens to-day; for I am tired already."

In truth Flora did look strangely pale, so much so that Flemyng dared not attempt to dissuade her from returning; moreover he himself felt as if he would fain be alone to think over all that had been said and done. So they strolled slowly and somewhat silently homewards; parting where they had met, in that convenient nook of the lower conservatories.

An hour or later, Mrs Charteris—coming in from a walk, during which she had taken occasion to exhibit a wonderful new dairy—was summoned to Lady Dorrillon's apartments.

The vast room was in semi-darkness; for there was only one shaded reading-lamp, on a table close to the sofa on which the lady was reclining. There was a lassitude in the *pose* that struck Marion at once; for Flora, though intensely indolent, was never languid.

"You're not ill, darling?" Mrs Charteris asked, eagerly.

"Not ill," Flora said. "Only rather weary. One gets tired sometimes with working the puppet-show—sick of the very sight of buckram and wood and wire. But all's well that ends well. And the labourer is worthy of his hire. And—I can't think of any other proverb just now. When Mr Flemyng publishes his life and correspondence—as I suppose he will some day—he must leave your letters out, *ma mignonne*; or quote from memory. There they are—every scrap of them, I do believe. Though, if it's any satisfaction to you, I've only glanced at about a dozen lines that he forced me to read. Don't blush, you foolish child! They were rather prettily expressed. But be less lavish of your pearls for the future."

It was good of Marion, that, in the midst of her expansive joy and gratitude, she could be checked by one misgiving.

"Flora, dearest, are you sure that you are safe, yourself? Can you tell me that these miserable letters have not cost you too dear? I should never forgive myself if you have got involved in trying to help me."

Lady Dorrillon kissed the fair penitent's forehead with more warmth than she was wont to display.

"You're a kind little creature," she said. "It is not every one that looks back for their friends when they have just got clear of the wood. No: you may burn those letters as soon as you choose. They have cost nothing that need weigh on your conscience or mine; nothing that even Sir Marmaduke would disapprove, if he knew all."

She only spoke simple truth there; fair words and manual salutations are the merest common-places in diplomacy like hers.

So Marion Charteris, after briefly verifying the tale of the packet, saw it melt away into feathery ashes, laughing merrily the while. But, before the small holocaust was consumed, she had registered a silent vow against similar indiscretion; which, to the best of the deponent's belief, has since been religiously kept. These things being fulfilled, she left Lady Dorrillon to her repose at the latter's especial request; and descended to minister to the entertaining of her other guests, carolling as she went, for very gladness of heart, as she had not done for many a day.

But Flora did not sleep, though for a long time she lay quite still, with eyelids fast closed; not unfrequently her lips moved; but they parted, once only, in an intelligible murmur—

"I am so glad he wanted money"

After a while she seemed to grow restless; and, rising quickly, crossed the room towards a table, on which lay some jewel-caskets and a huge despatch-box. This last she opened, and took from a deep secret drawer a flat oval case of blue velvet. She held it in her hand for a minute or more, after returning to her sofa, as if half afraid to look on its contents. At last she touched the spring with a sort of petulance, as if angered at her own irresolution.

Within was a tinted photograph, evidently taken from a half-length in oil. It was the likeness of a man still young, with features too massive and deeply cut for regular beauty; under the heavy black moustache the lips looked braced and stern; and the deep dark eyes seemed apter for command than pleading. Strength of passion and strength of will were written there only too plainly. At the very first glance, you were aware that the original of that portrait must have been gifted

with singular physical powers. The chest spread, broad and vast under the steel of the cuirass (the dress was that of the Household Cavalry); and the muscles of the long sinewy hand, that rested on the sword-hilt stood out under the gauntlet. After another steadfast look, you guessed that the man there represented might well have sinned and suffered above the measure of his fellows; and that there must needs be a story attached to his name.

Truly, there *was* such a story; and it has been told before—the story of Guy Livingstone.

That modest photograph had cost more than many a gallery-treasure of European renown; for it had been taken by stealth from a painting hanging in the hall of Kirton Manor; and, when the old family-servant betrayed his trust, he could console himself with the reflection that a tithe of the bribe had led greater men astray.

On that face Flora Dorrillon gazed very long and earnestly. She gazed, till a change came over her own, such as no living creature had ever seen there. Her bright proud eyes grew soft and languid with unutterable passion; the blood mantled hotly through her clear olive cheeks; from her lips broke low thrilling murmurs of endearment, whilst they lavished on the senseless image caresses that, not a few in the flesh would have risked their souls to win.

Folly? Of course it was the very climax of folly; scarcely worthy of a sentimental school-girl. But, I suppose, the cunningest of sorceresses have their weak point. In many circling years there is one hour fatal to their spells, if an assailant have the wit and courage to profit thereby. Then the baffled witch can but make her moan—

Alas! That any man should dare,
To climb up the yellow stair
Of Rapunzel's golden hair.

Furthermore, my critical or cynical friend, I would have you, in the midst of your derision, remember that there is reciprocity in most earthly things. I wonder how often you and I have unwittingly furnished food for merriment to the Dorrillon and

her peers? Is there not an ancient French proverb, which, being translated, saith—‘He laughs well who laughs last?’

The paroxysm—no gentler word would aptly describe it—lasted not long; but, when it passed away, Flora seemed thoroughly exhausted. She thrust the miniature-case under a pile of sofa-cushions; and laid her head down wearily there. In ten minutes she was dozing quietly; but, perchance, not dreamlessly. For ever and anon the pomegranate lips would part in a faint languid smile, just revealing the pearl-rows within; as if sleep were making large amends for the troubles of the last half-hour.

When Lady Dorrillon woke she was completely herself again; and was in brilliant spirits during all the remainder of the evening. Flemyng was almost beside himself with pride, as he gazed on her radiant beauty, and listened to her sparkling sallies.

There is so little to be recorded to that unlucky Vincent's credit, that it is only fair to mention, that he in no-wise attempted to abuse his advantages; and bore himself towards Flora with commendable discretion—not to say reserve. He did not affect to engross her attention, neither did he haunt her immediate neighbourhood too assiduously. Nevertheless, those two found several opportunities of converse more or less confidential; and Flemyng was furnished with his credentials for Lady Dorrillon's lawyer; his farther instructions were to be communicated to him in writing.

He conducted himself, too, in the smoking-room with a good deal of tact and judgment; not affecting to make light of his losses, but speaking of their immediate liquidation in such a matter-of-course way, that even Hardress felt comfortably reassured, and half repented him of his suspicions. But nothing would induce Flemyng to tempt Fortune farther; indeed the others did not press him. Every one seemed content to let things rest as they were.

On the following day Vincent started for town; having Bertie Grenvil for a travelling companion. The former kept up his spirits surprisingly well for a man going up to meet a heavy settlement. But this was not so wonderful, after all.

When the first impulse, causing him to reject Flora's proffered aid, had passed off, he came over to her side of the question with remarkable facility ; and was quite reconciled to the position by this time. Indeed he felt a certain pleasure in being helped over such a formidable stile by that delicate hand.

Flemyng's adieus at Charteris Royal were gone through with sufficient cordiality on all sides. Marion went so far as to express vague hopes of seeing him there again ere long. But Castlemaine had estimated the gallant's chances of return aright. When Vincent drove through the lodge-archway that morning, the couchant dragons, crowning the ponderous iron gate, grinned down on him—for the very last time.

CHAPTER XXXIV

BOOT AND SADDLE.

So winter softened into spring, and spring ripened to summer, bringing no incident worth recording ; unless it be the removal of the Princess' Own from Torrcaster to far less seductive quarters in the centre of the manufacturing districts. The War Office, as is well known, is sometimes almost feminine in its caprices ; regarding the roster as a pleasant military fiction, or a subject for grim practical jokes. In the present instance the route came down without the slightest previous notice ; taking every one concerned by surprise, and causing the rupture of all manner of engagements. There might have been heard, I fear, that morning in Torrcaster barracks a vast amount of "indifferent" language, whereof the mess-room was guilty of its full share.

The Colonel—as a rule, somewhat over-free of speech—was strangely silent now. But, as he sate in the orderly-room, more than one man noticed his face—how set and black it was ; save when gleams of fierce impatience flashed across it. The instant

he was free he ordered his horse, and rode swiftly away, never drawing bridle till he reached the lodge-gate of Blanche Ellerslie's modest demesne.

Two or three men were working at the parterres dotting the wide expanse of smooth-shaven lawn, in the centre of which the quaint picturesque old house was set. To one of these the Colonel flung the rein of his steaming hack; bidding the man "walk the animal about till he was cool. It was not worth while putting him in the stable."

The next minute, with a heart fluttering like a girl's, Vane stood on the threshold of the sunny southern boudoir, where Blanche nestled among her flowers—more fresh and tempting than the rarest of her own Provence roses. She evinced a proper amount of regret and surprise on hearing the news; was profuse in petulant invective against the tyrannous War Office—scrupling not, indeed, to speak evil of the highest dignitaries—and lavished pity on the unlucky exiles to the Cimmerian country. But this did not seem to satisfy her visitor at all.

"I've got something else to tell you this morning, Blanche," he said. "Mayn't I call you Blanche, just for this once?"

Yes, he might call her so if it pleased him: farewells have great privileges. Besides, Mrs Ellerslie was always 'Blanche' to her friends. And they had been very good friends—had they not?—though not very old ones. But what could he possibly have to say to her of such importance? He was not to keep her in suspense: she never could bear it.

Truly, the fair impatient was not long left in doubt as to Vereker's meaning. Before they were three minutes older he had asked her if she liked him enough to be his wife.

To say that the lady was not intensely gratified would be untrue. It was a triumph worth recording even in *her* diary. Colonel Vane was a brilliant *parti* in every worldly point of view: he was still in the early prime of manhood; well-born—brave to a fault—very handsome, too, after a truculent fashion—and, doubtless, he loved her with all his soul and strength. But then—he was notoriously violent and arbitrary of temper, it was not likely that he would connive at, or even patiently endure, the innocent diversions so dear to Blanche's coquettish little heart; more-

over, she had her own ideas—not in accordance with the received theory—as to the post-nuptial reformation of ‘rakes.’ She had enough, now, and to spare for all her wants, and a delicious sense of freedom to boot. On the whole, she thought she would ‘leave well alone.’

Vereker read her hesitation aright; he saw that the scale was turning against him, and grew terribly earnest in his pleading.

What was it that she doubted about? Only let her speak: there was no possible fancy of hers that he would not meet half-way. Of course, he didn’t expect her to go knocking about with the regiment. His papers should go in directly; he had been sick of the Service this year past. If she didn’t like his home when she saw it, she should live wherever she pleased; and have her own friends always round her. If he had been too hasty, he would even wait awhile for her answer. Let her say anything in all the world but—‘No.’

She was more moved than she cared to betray; yet, having once come to a resolution, she wavered not a whit.

“I must say it,” she answered, softly and sadly. “For your sake not less than my own. I’m not worthy of half that you offer; for I’m foolish and giddy, and wickedly capricious—don’t interrupt me; I know myself better than you can do. But, if I were a hundred times better we should never be happy together—I am certain of it. I am so sorry for this; but it serves me right for being so thoughtless. I fancied you were only amusing yourself, when—Well, never mind. I should be sorrier still if we did not part friends. Surely we may do that—still?”

She held out her hand in the pretty winning way that few men, or women, were able to withstand; but Vane did not seem to notice it.

“Why can’t you speak truth,” he growled, “and say who it is that you like better?”

The dark savage look in his eyes sent a thrill of vague terror through Blanche’s steady nerves. But she looked him fairly in the face, without flinching.

“There is none such, on my honour,” she said.

Even in our conventional generation there is wild work at times, when the passions of men—pagans in all save the name—

break loose. Harm might have come to some one—though none, of course, to herself—if Blanche had not spoken simple truth that day ; and if Vereker Vane had not believed her.

But he could not choose but trust her—thus far.

“Then there is no hope for me ; none whatever ?”

He rose as he spoke.

“No hope—from me,” she answered. “But the world is very wide, and it has many distractions for such as know how to seek them as well as you do. You will soon forget all this folly. But *don't* forget that I thanked you for offering—what I could not take ; and that I shall always wish you well. Now—say good-bye at once.

And she, too, rose, reaching forth her hand once again ; once again the proffer was unnoticed, if not actually spurned. They would have made a curious picture as they stood there—the trim slight figure and delicate demure features of the dainty little fairy contrasted so wonderfully with the proportions and lineaments of the stalwart soldier.

For several seconds Vereker's eyes were riveted on his companion's face, with the desperate hungry eagerness of those who look their very last. Before she had an idea of his intention, his strong arms were clasped round her waist, and he was straining her to his breast with a rough energy that left her breathless long after he had set her down ; raining down the while fierce kisses on her cheeks and brow and hair. All was so suddenly and quickly done, that the lady had no time to remonstrate or upbraid, even if she could have found voice to express her surprise and anger. The daring ravisher quitted the room and the house without uttering one word of apology or adieu : he was riding swiftly away under the flowering limes, before the pretty bird had half composed her ruffled plumes.

Mrs Ellerslie's first glance, on recovering her scattered senses, was turned towards the French windows opening down to the lawn ; and her first thought was—

“How very lucky that no one was working on that side of the house !”

When she was sure that no indiscreet eyes had witnessed her discomfiture, she felt greatly comforted, and much inclined to

laugh aloud ; for she could savour ridicule keenly, even at her own expense. But a certain hysterical swelling in her throat warned her to forbear. So she soliloquised mutely ; somewhat in this strain.

“ Did any one ever hear of such an infamous abuse of confidence ? He was so nice, too, at first, with his humility and unlimited concessions. ‘ Put not your trust in Prancers ’—I’m sure one might say. Well, I needn’t pity him, that’s one comfort. If I did him any harm, we are more than even now. It only shows how right I was in holding fast to my—No. Fancy living with such an incarnate tornado as that man ! He’ll keep his own counsel—I feel sure of that : otherwise, I think, I should try and poison him. If Laura Brancepeth were to get hold of this, I should never hear the last of it. Now I must go and repair damages. I suppose I shall have another farewell-visit to-day from that handsome wicked Armytage boy. I can keep *him* in order at all events, especially after such a lesson. I wonder whether *he* will propose to me too ? *Ce serait drôle tout de même.* ”

We need not assist at that second passage-of-arms, which was not marked by any violation of the laws of courtly tourney

As Vereker Vane paced slowly in through the barrack-gates, the troopers sitting outside the guard-room rose up to salute him. When he had passed, said one—more observant than his comrades—

“ What’s up with the Colonel this morning, I wonder ? He’s never been and got another crumpler ? It ain’t jumping weather now. But he looks a sight worse than he did that day when he was so near drowned.”

Truly, the Colonel *had* gotten a fall, and a heavy one to boot. But all outward signs thereof soon vanished. Men of his stamp don’t die of heart-aches, neither do they often fall sick of sorrow. His life is good enough for most insurance offices even now, and he may be backed to outlast most of his hard-living fellows ; though he has forced the pace fearfully since he sold out. Only that hard battered look, which used occasionally to disfigure his handsome face, has settled down there now for ever and aye.

One meets Vereker Vane incessantly—always in the best of

bad company. You may see him leaning over a certain low sweeping phaeton, when Pelagia halts her steppers at the head of the Ladies' Mile to give our wives and sisters a lesson in dress, if not in manners—lounging in the background of the stage-box, in the front of which sits Anonyma, like a robber-queen of old, all-a-blaze with ill-gotten jewels—gazing down from the corner windows of the Café Anglais, on the turbulent lamp-lit Boulevard, with Emeraude's glittering green eyes, or Coralie's ruddy tresses, close to his shoulder. (His *petit nom* out there is 'Bruno:' he is so apt to growl and bite on slight provocation.) Since his small idol of fair white marble was shattered, the images before whom he casts down a careless irreverent worship have all been of plaster, or sham Parian at the best. In plain words—from the hour that Blanche Ellerslie said him *Nay*, Vereker Vane has never wooed a woman whose love was not to be had for the asking or to be bought with gold.

Some who chance to be acquainted with this episode are apt to impute most of the *Sabreur's* after-misdemeanors to the dangerous widow. So think not I. I believe there was a dash of the Bohemian in his blood, that was sure to assert itself sooner or later, though perchance not with such open audacity. I believe that if Blanche had said *Yes* instead of *No*, the marriage would have been an unhappy one; and that the result—so far as Vereker was concerned—would have been nearly the same, only longer deferred.

But this opinion is strictly in confidence between us, reader of mine. Whenever the subject is mooted, and those two names are mentioned together, I shake my head as significantly as any other commiserant. I know my duty as a son of Adam better than to lose an opportunity of shifting blame or responsibility on to the ivory shoulders of an absent Eve. Indeed, in this case, it would hardly be worth while to argue the question. The balance-sheet of that reckless little trader in hearts is so hopelessly heavy already, that it can matter nothing, if another creditor's be unrighteously added thereto.

CHAPTER XXXV

ERUPIT.

WE take up the main thread of our story again, at Mote.

Within the last few months things were altered there decidedly for the worse. Mrs Maskelyne's temper had waxed more capricious and ungovernable—her husband's less even and enduring. Perhaps Brian was less disposed to be patient, from the fact that these sullen or angry fits were invariably more frequent and bitter after one of Daventry's visits: the latter came and went pretty much as he liked now—always on the same pretext, of Mr Standen's business. Certain households go on from year's end to year's end, very respectably if not smoothly, in spite of ceaseless jangles and jars; indeed, these appear sometimes only to keep up such a wholesome irritation as shall prevent the conubial blood from stagnating. But the heads of such families as these are not cast in Brian Maskelyne's mould.

His nervous horror of anything like a quarrel had caused him for awhile to be weakly indulgent, rather than irritate his wife's uncertain temper; for which he was then prone to find all imaginable excuses. Even now, when he was growing each day more heartsick and weary of it all, he still forbore to answer her according to her folly; and invariably controlled himself in her presence, though he had to wrestle with his rising passion as with a spasm of physical pain.

Bessie knew this; and would own it, sometimes, with a sort of tempestuous remorse and vague self-accusation. But the knowledge did not make her a whit more considerate, nor permanently soften her. Brian loved his wife so dearly still that common kindness on her part—to say nothing of demonstrative affection—would have won him back again in a week. But of this Bessie Maskelyne seemed incapable; all her pretty petulance had vanished; in its place was a sullen listlessness, varied, on the faintest provocation by violent outbreaks; to use the servile vernacular—‘there was no pleasing her, any way.’

It was not in human nature—much less in a nature wayward and wilful as Brian's—to endure all this tamely. His absence from home began to be more and more frequent; he affected a keen interest in all county affairs, which he had hitherto utterly neglected; and greatly relaxed his rule of going nowhere unless Bessie's name was included in the invitation. It came to be understood that Maskelyne was not averse to sleeping where he dined; and he would sometimes stay over the following day, if an agricultural meeting, or the like, was in prospect.

Oddly enough—though Brian cordially hated his wife's cousin, and perhaps imputed to the latter's evil influence much of the discomfort prevailing at Mote—he never dreamt of suspecting Darenty of any criminal design.

The fatal *ophthalmia maritalis* was upon him: the disease that, often, is to be cured only by surgery so terribly severe that the patient is fain to cry out in his agony—

“Ah, friends! why have ye healed me?”

It is possible, surely, to give a certain Great Personage his due without constituting oneself his Advocate. On this principle I would take leave to suggest that Jem Standen's daughter hardly had a fair chance after all, considering how fearfully her antecedents were against her, and how difficult it must have been to cast old entanglements adrift. If she had married a man endowed with a will stronger than her own, and with cool judgment to boot, he might have over-awed her violent temper till he brought it into wifely subjection; such an one she might have feared at first, possibly have loved in after-days; and, with such a guide, she might have struggled through the mire and brambles that needs must have beset her path through the strange country till she reached the open ground beyond. Then it might have fared with her—not worse than with many; the noon and evening of whose life have passed tranquilly enough, after a dark and stormy morning.

But she began by despising her lover as a brain-sick boy; and ‘honour’ her husband she never did, from the moment that she uttered a lie at the altar even to the black and shameful end.

You may easily guess that, amongst the houses chiefly fre-

quented by Maskelyne in his roaming fit, Warleigh stood first and foremost. It was not the best place for him, in some respects.

To begin with, he was made almost *too* welcome there; it was somewhat too palpable that both his host and hostess considered their guest might have excellent reasons for preferring another fire-side to his own. Moreover, when he hinted at domestic troubles and growing causes for discontent, if he was not actually encouraged to unbosom himself, he assuredly was not checked. Once, when Brian had been unusually explicit on this point, Mrs Seyton did feel certain conscientious scruples, and confided the same to her lord. But Tom utterly declined to view the matter in this light.

"What does it matter?" he grumbled. "He's sure to find her out sooner or later."

In this unrepentant frame of mind Kate was fain to leave him, neither did she care to broach the subject again. With this foolish pair feeling was ever apt to carry the day against rigid principle; indeed, they were too staunch in friendship not to be somewhat un-Christian in their antipathies.

It was a dull sultry evening in June—not a breath of air stirring—with threatening of storm; though, as yet, only summer lightning gleamed against the dark bank of cloud, from behind which came, ever and anon, faint murmurs of distant thunder. Seyton and Maskelyne were sitting alone over their claret; the latter had come over early on the previous afternoon to dine and sleep; both, that day, had attended the meeting of an agricultural society close by, and Brian was not to return home till the morrow. They were on the point of rising to take their coffee, under Kate's auspices, when a servant came to say that the head-keeper from Mote wished to see his master immediately.

"Send him in here," Brian said carelessly: "that is—if you don't mind, Tom. They've been meddling with the tame pheasants, I suppose. But why on earth should Farnell come bothering over here about it? He knows what to do better than I can tell him; and he has plenty of help at hand."

The instant the keeper entered, Seyton, at least, saw that

there was no question of fur or feather here. He was a fine sturdy specimen of his class. His bluff face, florid by nature, had been weather-tanned to a deep copper-red; but its colour now was as of one lately risen from rose sickness, and the sweat stood in big drops on his forehead: as he stood there, kneading his cap nervously in his brawny hands, he looked strangely unlike the man whose name was a bugbear to every poacher, and poacher's child, within leagues of Mote.

"Take a glass of wine, Farnell," Seyton said. "What the deuce has brought you over in such a hurry? You must have run every yard of the way."

"I druv over," the other answered shortly. "And I'd rather not drink, sir; thanking you all the same. But I'd like to say a word or two to master—alone, if I might make so bold."

"What utter nonsense—" Brian was beginning. But Seyton stopped him at once.

"Didn't you say, a minute ago, that Farnell knew what to do as well as you could teach him? That's just what *I* think now. I'll leave you together. If I'm wanted, I'm always within hail."

Some apprehension that he could not define caused Tom to go no further away than the hall without. He heard the keeper's gruff voice murmuring monotonously; then a quick startled exclamation in Brian's tones, and Farnell's brief reply. Then the door was thrown violently open, and Maskelyne stood on the threshold beckoning to him.

There was on his face nearly the same expression that it wore on the night of his mother's death, when he reeled under the sudden blow; only now it was marked by a ghastlier horror. His fingers closed round Seyton's wrist convulsively, as he drew him within the doorway; and his voice sounded hard and grating, like the voice of one whose throat is parched with fever.

"Do you remember my asking you, long ago, if you knew anything about my—my wife? May God in heaven forgive you, if you guessed half of—what I know now!

He dropped the other's arm, as if he cared not to wait for a

reply ; and sate down on the nearest chair, burying his face in his clasped hands, resting on the table.

Instantly it flashed across Seyton's memory how Emily Maskelyne had once addressed him in nearly the same words. In both matters he was surely guiltless, and could scarcely have acted otherwise than he did ; nevertheless, his conscience smote him again sharply. It was perhaps impatience of this self-reproach that caused him to accost Farnell somewhat angrily.

"What has happened over there? In the devil's name, man—out with it at once. It only makes things worse to falter over them."

The keeper was in no-wise hurt or disconcerted by the manner of Seyton's address ; indeed, to use his own expression, "it did him good to be roughed a bit just then." Without more ado he told his tale ; it was terribly simple and convincing.

Late on the previous evening Daventry had arrived at Mote. On that same afternoon Farnell, going his rounds, had met the cousins walking through the park-woods. 'Met' is hardly the right word ; for they were talking so earnestly, that they passed within thirty yards of the keeper as he came up a cross-ride, without knowing it. Their manner and bearing towards each other were so strangely confidential and familiar, that even Farnell's rude instinct told him something was wrong. So he followed and watched, as his knowledge of the ground enabled him easily to do, till he had seen and heard enough (they chanced to halt for awhile close to where he lay couched in the fern), to establish strong circumstantial proof of Mrs Maskelyne's guilt.

It was some time before the sturdy keeper could collect his scattered wits enough to act up to his simple ideas of duty.

"I were fairly dazed," he said afterwards. "If it had been anything in *my* line, I'd ha' known what to do. But sich goin's on as these is contrairy to everythink."

Eventually it occurred to him to find Brian Maskelyne with the briefest possible delay ; he chanced to have heard that the

latter had gone over to Warleigh; so thither Farnell betook himself as fast as his stout old pony could draw him.

Seyton listened, without speaking a syllable; only grinding his teeth now and then. Before the tale was quite told, he had rung a bell sharply.

"Let Mr Maskelyne's phaeton come round at once," he said to the servant. "Don't stand staring there" (for the man could not dissemble his amazement); "but tell them to be quick about it."

Then he turned and laid his hand on Brian's shoulder, who had not stirred since he sate down.

"I go with you to Mote, of course. I'll say three words to Kate before we start. I myself can't be sorrier than she will be. Go down-stairs, Farnell; and get a draught of something, if you can't eat. I don't wonder all this has sickened you. I needn't tell you to keep a close tongue in your head. So far, you have done right well and wisely."

So Seyton went to seek his wife at once. You may guess at Kate's grief when she heard the shameful news; but she, too, was more shocked than surprised.

"I'm so glad that you can go with him, Tom," she said.

"I couldn't do otherwise," her husband answered. "If Brian went back alone, there might be black work done before morning; and blood won't wash out such a scandal as this—more's the pity, I'm half inclined to say. There's one miserable comfort, the disgrace must have come sooner or later; and the thieves' brood will be cleared out of Mote to-night for good and all. Kiss me once, my Kate, before I go. When I hear these things, I feel as if I never thanked Providence half enough for giving me—you."

When Seyton returned to the dining-room he found Maskelyne sitting in the same posture: he did not lift his head till his carriage was announced; then he rose, and followed his friend out, silently. His face could scarcely be paler than its wont; but there was an unnatural whiteness about the lips, and in his great black eyes there gleamed an evil light. Tom was thoroughly right; Brian was *not* fit to be trusted that night alone. Few words were spoken, and those of no special import,

from the moment that Seyton, at a sign from the other, took the reins, till they reached the side-entrance into the Mote demesne that lay nearest to Warleigh. It was locked; but the groom opened it with a master-key. Their road led, not up the main avenue, but across an open part of the park whence a considerable part of the house was visible; indeed, it was necessary to coast round an angle of the gardens before you branched off either to the front entrance or the stables in the rear.

Just before reaching this point Seyton felt his arm grasped suddenly; and turning, as he drew rein, he saw that his companion was pointing towards three windows, nearly opposite to them now, brilliantly lighted, and apparently open; though the distance was too great to make sure of this.

Seyton was as much at home at Mote as if he had been born therein, and guessed Brian's meaning at once. Those windows belonged to a room called the Oak Parlour, which, for generations, had been the usual dining-room of the family when they had no strangers to entertain. It was nearly a certainty that those whom they sought were there.

"Take the reins," Tom said to the groom who sat behind them; "and mark what I tell you. Drive very slowly along the turf by the road-side—there's plenty of light for that—till you come closely up to the stable-archway; the asphalte will deaden the wheels there if you go in at a foot's pace. Get some one to help you with your horses, whom you can trust not to make a noise. Neither of you are to leave the stables till you're sent for—mind that. And don't take the harness off. Your master does not wish it known in the house that he has returned. You understand, I can see: that's enough. Come along, Brian."

In another minute the two men had leapt the sunk-fence of the gardens and were approaching the house; masking themselves where they could by clumps of shrubs and the like: ere long they found themselves close under the open windows of the Oak Parlour—so close that they could hear low voices and smothered laughter from within, though no words were distinguishable. There was a considerable downward slope from the

front of the house to the rear ; so that entering *à plain-pied* from the north—you found yourself some twelve feet above the ground when you looked out southward, with a basement-story below you.

“There’s sure to be a ladder near the tool-house,” Brian said in a hoarse whisper, speaking now for the first time.

Indeed, they found one without any difficulty, of a length convenient for their purpose, and laid it noiselessly against the ivy curtaining the walls, so that the topmost rung lay just below the window-sill.

As Maskelyne was about to mount Seyton grasped his arm.

“You won’t be rash?” he said in his ear. “For God’s sake keep cool.”

The other shook his head ; and extricating himself impatiently, went up with swift cautious steps, till he could discern plainly what was going on within, without much danger of giving immediate alarm.

Can you guess what Brian Maskelyne saw when he came to the house of his fathers like a thief in the night ?

CHAPTER XXXVI.

EVASIT.

IN the remotest corner of the room, buried in the depths of a luxurious arm-chair—his bloated limbs supported on another—Mr Standen was sleeping heavily ; his stertorous breathing stirred the cambric kerchief that veiled his face till it heaved again ; it was evident that the roll of a drum would scarcely have wakened him. But Brian never glanced at this figure ; two others in the same room engrossed all his interest. It was no wonder. Those other two made up a picture that *Le Mari*

Complaisant himself would hardly have contemplated with calmness.

Daventry was lounging indolently on a low couch drawn up to a round table laden with all manner of rare fruits and wines; his complexion was not much altered, but there was a 'puffed' look about his face, which, together with a certain glaziness of eye, betrayed that he had been drinking deep; neither was his carouse finished, it would seem, though he had begun to smoke, for each time that he took the cigar from his lips he refreshed himself with a copious draught from a huge goblet at his elbow.

On some cushions strewn close by the couch's side, Mrs Maskelyne half reclined; so that her shining tresses almost brushed her cousin's shoulder; her dress—absurdly rich for such a family-party—seemed expressly fashioned to enhance her beauty; she had never looked more transcendently handsome.

Distraught as he was with anger and shame, her unhappy husband noted this; he noted something else too—something which added the last drop to the full cup of his dishonour. On Bessie's fair face there were no vulgar signs of excess; nevertheless, it was too evident that she had shared in the night's reveling more freely than beseems womanhood. A few cups more would ripen the lovely Bacchanal into the reckless Mænad. As it was, her head might have formed a study for Ariadne at the bridal-feast, before Evian license had degenerated into orgie. Just at that moment she was humming below her breath a verse of one of Béranger's earlier *chansons*;—a good knowledge of French was among Bessie's rare accomplishments.

"That sounds rather nice," Daventry said, lazily. "Sing it out loud."

"You wouldn't understand it," she retorted. "Besides, you must ask more prettily than that before I exert myself to amuse you. You're not quite the Sultan yet, remember; or at all events you're not in your own harem."

"So you want to be entreated," the other said; with his own devilish sneer. "You must do as you're bid, young lady. I wonder you haven't learnt that much by this time. You're spoilt by the company you've been keeping lately. One would think you were playing the fool with that whey-faced husband of

yours. I wonder how he'll like finding me here, when he comes back from Warleigh. Why don't he stop there altogether? Curse the whole lot of them!"

Mrs Maskelyne held up her forefinger in imperious warning; it was a white and shapely finger enough, albeit not quite so taper as might have been desired.

"Now, Kit, you'd better drop that at once. I won't hear the poor harmless boy abused behind his back; and you've less right to do it than any one living. You don't frighten me with your big words. If I sing, I'll sing to please myself, not you. And I'll have my wages beforehand; or something on account, at all events."

No need to ask what these wages were, as she held up her ripe lips poutingly. Before such a temptation even Galahad might have owned himself in sore strait.

The lawyer laughed a coarse, careless laugh; he bent his head, nevertheless, to meet the caress half-way. At that instant a slight noise from the window behind them diverted the attention of both. After one glance over his shoulder, Daventry sprang up with a startled oath, echoed by a shriek from Bessie. But before he had fairly gained his feet Brian Maskelyne's gripe was on his throat; and, amidst a crash of shivering glass, the two men rolled over on the floor—grappling.

All this while Seyton had stood stock-still, watching his friend's movements heedfully, and keeping himself ready for prompt action. As Maskelyne laid his hands on the window-sill to swing himself up, Tom's foot was set on the ladder, and he mounted at his best speed. But—quick and agile as he was—he came on the scene some seconds too late. Indeed, Brian had sprung, as it were, with a single bound from the ledge of the window to his enemy's throat.

When Seyton vaulted lightly in Mr Standen had just started from his chair, and was staring about him with wild, lack-lustre eyes, like some hideous old somnambulist. Bessie had thrown herself back against the mantel, her hands clasped tightly, her beautiful face convulsed with terror. Her firm nerves were for the moment utterly unstrung; and her agonized entreaty was almost unintelligible.

"Part them—oh, for God's sake, only part them!"

Seyton needed no bidding to do that. It was only by a desperate strain of his tough muscles—exerted, too, with very scant ceremony—that he succeeded in wrenching the two men asunder. It must be owned, that even in his rough handling Tom evinced a certain respect of persons. He dragged Brian back and loose by main force; but, in so doing, he used the Lawyer's prostrate carcase as a fulcrum for his own foot—it was many a day before those aching ribs forgot the merciless pressure.

Brian ceased to struggle directly he found himself fairly in Seyton's grasp. A thin stream of blood was trickling from a small triangular cut just above his eye-brow; for, even in that brief confused grapple, the diamond on Daventry's left hand had found time to come home, missing, by about half-an-inch, the fatal temple-vein. The Lawyer was in yet worse case. He was two stone heavier than Maskelyne, and infinitely his superior in strength and science; but all these advantages were neutralized by the murderous gripe on his throat; had there been none to part them, those slender hands would assuredly have done hangman's work. As it was, for several seconds after the struggle was over, Daventry lay choking and gurgling helplessly, before he managed to rise and stagger into the nearest chair.

Seyton was the first to speak, addressing himself to Brian.

"I'm utterly ashamed of you. Is this what you promised me? Do you think you can better things by meddling with a hound like yonder one? We'll have no more witnesses in, at all events."

He strode to the door, and locked it—just in time. For hurrying footsteps sounded in the corridor; and a tremulous voice asked, "what was the matter?"

"Go down-stairs again," Tom said, quietly. "And don't come back till you're rung for; you're not wanted here. You know me well enough to do as I bid you."

There was a whispered consultation; then some one said, in firmer tones:

"It is Mr Seyton, sure enough. It's all right if he's there,"—and then the footsteps went away.

All this while Maskelyne leant against the opposite angle of

the mantel from that where his wife was standing ; he still drew his breath hard and pantingly ; and from time to time staunched the blood that had not ceased to flow from his forehead, with a kind of mechanical carelessness. Bessie had quite recovered her self-possession. She was one of those obstinately dauntless persons who never will throw up any game whilst a single card remains to be played ; so now she would make a last effort, perhaps, to do her justice, for the sake of others, rather than for her own. She crossed over to where her husband stood, and laid her hand on his arm, with a brave attempt at her old imperious gaiety.

“ Why, Brian, are you utterly mad ? What penance do you mean to pay for frightening me out of my wits, and nearly killing my cousin, when we were neither of us dreaming of harm ? Somebody must have been poisoning your mind against me. I think I can guess who. But it isn’t like you, to condemn people unheard ; especially your poor wife, who has every one but you against her. Kit, why do you sit so helplessly there ? Surely you might take my part, if not your own.”

Thus adjured, the Lawyer did speak, but it was hoarsely, and with difficulty ; and he kept constantly clutching his throat, as if he were choking still.

“ I can’t, for the life of me, understand what it’s all about. The world has come to a pretty pass, if a man can’t dine with his own cousin, in her own house, in her own father’s presence, without being throttled unawares. I’m not likely to trouble Mote with my presence again ; but I’d like to set things straight before I go. Mr Maskelyne, on my honour, there’s nothing—”

He came to an abrupt stop here, fairly disconcerted by the other’s glance ; even his case-hardened hide was not proof against its cold, cutting scorn. To neither his wife nor her kinsman did Brian answer one word. But he shook off Bessie’s hand, as if the taint of leprosy was in her fresh beauty, and turned to Seyton.

“ They talk of punishment on this side of the grave. Mine ought to count for something. That I should have let my mother die, rather than break faith with *her* : and, before I had put off my mourning—to hear what I’ve heard, and see what

I've seen to-night. A pretty picture it was! By G—d, there's not a better one in all the 'Harlot's Progress.' ”

If it was not fear, it was some feeling nearly akin thereto, that caused the guilty wife to shrink back before the hate and loathing of those fierce black eyes. But Seyton came forward, and grasped Brian's arm; speaking coldly and gravely.

“ You're not fit to talk just now; your head is turned with all this. I'm sure I don't wonder at it. Will you let me speak for you, as I spoke for your mother long ago? ”

The other nodded assent, as he cast himself down on a couch; a physical reaction was coming over him, and he felt strangely faint and weary.

“ Mrs Maskelyne ”—Seyton went on—“ I can give you no other title whilst you are under this roof—when I say that your husband knows *all*, I have said nearly enough for all present purposes. There is evidence enough, and to spare, against you, should such be needed; but I fancy your side will hardly care to push ours to proof. As to what future steps Brian may think it right to take, I can say absolutely nothing. You must see the expediency of leaving Mote with as little delay as possible; your father is ready to escort you. If you wish to communicate hereafter with your—with Brian, you know his lawyer's address perfectly well.”

Whilst Seyton thus delivered himself, a marked change had come over Bessie's bearing and demeanour. As she drew her superb figure up to its full height, no injured patrician dame could have looked more royally defiant.

“ Have it your own way,” she said, “ and tell your own tale. I shan't take the trouble to contradict you, now or ever. So I am really to turn my back, to-night, on Mote for good and all? Well—as the woman says in the play—‘ I will go to mine own people.’ The change won't break my heart, I can tell you. I'm nearly tired of playing the great lady—getting small thanks and less credit for it. I'll try the old roving random life again; it suits me best, after all. Papa—why do you go on whimpering in that absurd way? Of course you'll be taken care of somehow. And Kit—don't look so downcast; it's no more your fault than mine that our genteel comedy could not be played out. Hang-

ing our heads and moping over it won't mend matters at all events. Whenever you go, and wherever you go, I go too; that is—if you care for my company."

Even while she was speaking she had passed over to where Daventry sat, and laid her hand on his shoulder. The Lawyer twisted himself away uneasily, muttering something about "infernal folly," and "rashness"; and never lifting his dark spiteful glances from the ground. But Bessie did not seem to heed her cousin's ungracious manner; she kept her place resolutely at his side, as if conscious that *there* henceforward—come what might—she was destined to abide.

She could spare no repentant word, no pleading or pitiful look, for the beguiled husband, who had laid all that man holds dearest at her feet, never grudging the sacrifice so long as he believed her true; who would have drained his heart's blood, drop by drop, to save her from injury and insult. All her care and tenderness were kept for the sullen craven who had tyrannized over her from childhood; and now—in the midst of the ruin he had caused—was brooding only over the partial discomfiture of his own sordid ends. Daventry liked his cousin well, in his brutal, sensual way: but had the scene been shifted to the shore of the Bosphorus, and she had stolen forth, at the peril of her life, to join him, Kit would have betrayed her retreat for a sufficient 'consideration' ay—though he had guessed that her portion, the same night, would be sack or bowstring.

All this Bessie knew, whilst she kept her place unflinchingly at his side. Despite the woman's cynicism and ingratitude, few men would have been free from a shameful fascination—gazing on her grand defiant beauty. Throughout all ages Crime—fair-faced and audacious—has never lacked admirers. Unless old tales lie, the hearts of some of our ancestresses fluttered with more than pity as they watched Claude Duval—all lace and lawn and scarlet—passing airily to his doom on the Tyburn Tree.

But Tom Seyton, being a very practical matter-of-fact person, was not apt to be impressed by stage effects, however striking, and was singularly indifferent to the romance of sin.

He answered Bessie's last words with provoking coolness.

"You are under a great mistake when you talk in that strain

After you have once gone forth from Mote you can drag Brian's name through the mire, at your pleasure, as long as he chooses to let you wear it. But while you are under this roof you are under his authority; and you must leave it according to his fancy—not your own. It is best to avoid unnecessary scandal. So it will be best that you should go away quietly, with all your belongings; under your father's escort, as I said before. As for your cousin—there's no need to stand on ceremony with *him*; nor is there any need that he should cumber the air here three minutes longer."

Daventry rose up on his feet with a miserable attempt at bravado.

"You're giving yourself a deal of trouble about nothing," he said. "I'm just as keen to be out of this as you can be to get rid of me. I wish I'd never seen the inside of these doors. If you'll unlock that one, I'll go to my room, and start as soon as I've got my traps together. The devil thank you for your hospitality! Now—do you mean to let me pass?"

Seyton turned away from the speaker towards Maskelyne, who sat with his head bowed on his breast, apparently scarcely heeding or hearing what passed around him.

"Brian, I've a fancy about this. You don't mind my indulging in it?"

Tom had to take silence for consent; but he went on, without a pause—addressing himself to Daventry, now.

"I shall not unlock the door; not let you pass—simply, because your way out lies *there*." He pointed to the open window. "The road that was good enough for honest men, is too good for a cur like yourself. Take it—do you hear me;—and without parleying, if you're wise."

Even Daventry's base blood, torpid under any ordinary insult, surged up furiously in revolt; besides, the purely animal instinct, that sometimes causes the most cowardly of brutes to show fight, caused him to remember that a woman stood by who had dared and lost all for him. He set his feet firmly; and his savage eyes glanced round seeking a weapon, as he said, through his clenched teeth—

"You may do your worst and be d—d to you. I'll go my own way, or—"

The tardy defiance was never finished. Before it was half uttered, Seyton had begun to draw nearer and nearer to the speaker, with a measured determination, more ominous than haste; his face settling fast into the dark fell menace that possessed it on the night when he sought and found Brian Maskelyne.

You may, perchance, remember that our prudent Tom's grand theories concerning long-suffering and the like were absurdly apt to break down in time of trial; as is the case with more eminent sages, his precepts were infinitely better than his practice.

Daventry had seen those features thus transfigured once before; but the sight was utterly new to Bessie Maskelyne—so new and strange, that she was fairly startled out of her audacity and self-possession. Her only anxiety now was to get her cousin out of harm's way.

"Go, Kit. For God's sake, go—this moment," she managed to shriek out.

And, clutching his arm, strove to drag him towards the window with all her strength—a strength passing that of ordinary womanhood.

The Lawyer did not need much coaxing or compulsion; with every step that Seyton advanced he himself receded two, till his back touched the window-sill. There he shook off Bessie's grasp roughly, and, muttering something about "two to one being no fair-play," swung himself up and outwards: he groped about cautiously with his feet till he felt the uppermost rounds of the ladder; but directly he did so he began to descend in such haste, that he stumbled midway, and fell heavily on the turf beneath.

He came to no hurt, however, for Bessie, leaning anxiously from the window, saw him rise at once, and disappear into the darkness—first growling out a curse on the house and all it held, that made even her blood curdle; though she was as 'steady' under ordinary foul language as an adjutant's charger under fire.

Then a great revulsion of feeling came over the guilty wife. Utterly reckless of her own dishonour, she sickened at her paramour's shame. Now that he was safe, she felt as though she had rather he had died where he stood than have escaped—*thus*.

How many are there in this world, I wonder, who, bewailing

their past weakness—ay, with tears of blood—have cried aloud that, were the choice given them again, they would take the scathe rather than the scorn?

The effect of this scene on Bessie Maskelyne was very remarkable. When she turned inwards from the window, her spirit was thoroughly quelled; she had neither heart nor courage now to fight out the losing battle; and she addressed Seyton with a submissive humility piteously significant, considering the nature of the woman.

“As Brian won’t speak to me—I can’t blame him—will you tell me what I am to do? I don’t wonder that you are anxious to get rid of us. We won’t trouble you a minute longer than we can help; and we won’t rob you, either. I’ll only take what is really necessary for travelling; so we shall very soon be ready. When do you wish us to go?”

Before Seyton could reply Maskelyne lifted his head; and spoke in a dull, heavy voice, like one newly roused from narcotic sleep.

“Make her understand—I can’t—that I wish her to take everything she has ever called her own, except my mother’s jewels. It will be a kindness—the very last she can ever do me.”

“You hear what Brian says?” Seyton resumed, in a somewhat gentler tone. “I am sure you will not argue this point; but do just as he wishes. As for the time of your departure, you will fix that yourself. The carriages to take you into Torrcaster will be ready whenever you choose to order them. As long as you are under this roof you are still mistress of all. I don’t want to be officious or dictatorial; but I am forced to speak for Brian, as you see. I confess I think it would be far best that you should part here—at once, and not meet again.”

Bessie bowed her head—always with that same strange humility—murmuring—

“Yes: it will be far best so.”

Then she moved towards the door which Seyton had unlocked and held open, taking her father’s arm as she passed him; the miserable old man needed both guidance and support. But she turned on the threshold, as if checked by some sudden impulse; and walked back with the quick firm step, you might have noted

on that evening when you first saw her under twilight. Maske-lyne did not seem to heed her approach ; and, for some seconds, Bessie stood behind his shoulder, gazing down on her husband's motionless figure, rather wistfully. Then she said—

“ Brian, I don't deserve to be listened to. But, if you shut your ears to the very last words that I shall ever trouble you with, perhaps you'd be sorry some day. I'm not going to sham penitence ; I dare say, if it were all to do over again, I shouldn't come much better out of it. I'm not going to excuse myself, either. But if you knew all, you would set something down to the school I was trained in ; girls who see and hear what I did before I was sixteen don't often make good wives to honest men. They took care to clip my wings early ; long before you saw me, I had less free-will left than most decoy-ducks. I have had a hard life of it sometimes ; and I shall have a harder yet in time to come. ‘ It will serve me right ’—every one will say. So say I ; but I wouldn't change it even if I could. But I *am* sorry that we ever met—so sorry, that I wish one of us had died first. Remember ; I have never asked you to forgive. But if I ever say a prayer again, I will pray that you may one day forget that you ever knew me, or mine. Farewell.”

She spoke in a low, steady voice ; pausing a little between each curt sentence. With the last word she stooped and just brushed Brian's hair with her lips. Then she passed swiftly out into the corridor, where her father stood muttering and moaning.

I have not alluded to Mr Standen throughout ; simply because no one present had taken the slightest heed of him. But, in truth, he supplied the horribly grotesque contrast which often seems to bring out in blacker relief the other features of any picture of human sorrow or pain. While he went maundering on—first entreating to be informed “ What it was all about,” then whimpering out cautions to every one, “ to keep their tempers, and talk it over quietly,” finally subsiding into querulous curses levelled chiefly at the culprits who “ had turned him adrift again in his old age ”—he might have suggested to Doré a fresh illustration for the Inferno.

Brian never stirred or lifted his head whilst his wife was speaking ; only he shivered slightly when he felt her warm

breath on his neck. But, as the last rustle of Bessie's dress died away in the corridor, he rose and came hurriedly towards Seyton.

"Let us go back to Warleigh at once," he said. "We have no more to do here. I think I should go mad if I stayed in this house an hour longer."

And indeed, the pupils of his eyes were fixed in the unnatural dilatation which betokens pressure on the brain.

"Don't excite yourself," Tom answered, soothingly. "We'll start as soon as I've seen Dunlop, and when you've had your head looked to. That's a nasty cut; does it pain you much?"

Maskelyne looked at the speaker in a vacant, puzzled way; putting his hand to his brow, on which the blood had now congealed.

"The cut? I'd forgotten all about it. It's not worth thinking of. No; my head don't pain me much. Only it feels like a lump of hot lead. This room is horribly close, and the air outside is little better."

Nevertheless he went straight to the window, and leant out into the murky night, as if the dark blank void could bring him rest.

In a couple of minutes Tom had so far set things to rights that there were few traces left of the recent struggle, beyond a small heap of shivered glass and china. Then he rang for the butler; and that dignitary soon appeared, wearing his imperturbable company-face.

"Look here, Dunlop," Seyton said. "I've always considered you both prudent and trustworthy. We shall soon see if I'm right or wrong. There has been sad work here to-night, as you may guess; there's no need to make things worse by prying or babbling. You'll know all about it some day. All that I can tell you now is that Mrs Maskelyne and her father leave Mote within a few hours, and that it is not likely they will return. You will see that everything is properly arranged for taking them into Torrcaster; and—mark this—that lady is your mistress so long as she is under this roof; and you will have to answer for any disrespect or disobedience shown to her. I'm not afraid of you; but I expect you to keep the other servants in order. Send round to the stables and tell them to put to: your master

goes back with me to Warleigh. And bring something to bandage a cut ; a couple of cambric handkerchiefs will do. Do you fully understand me ? ”

Mr Dunlop listened with deferential attention ; his staid, serene countenance betraying no shade of surprise. Long experience had taught him to ignore—at least outwardly—all the faults, failings, and disasters of those whom he condescended to serve.

“ I am grieved to hear this, sir,” he replied, with a decorous sympathy. “ But I understand you perfectly ; and you may thoroughly trust me. I should be sorry to forfeit your good opinion.”

So the butler departed, his grave brow slightly overcast with care. Yet not more so than might have been expected, if he had been charged with some important domestic commission, not easy of execution, such as, for instance, the preparation of a state banquet at very short notice. Let it be recorded, that he carried out his order faithfully, to the letter. Up to the moment when the train moved out of Torrcaster station, and the liveried footmen, left on the platform, saluted her retreating figure, Mrs Maskelyne could not have complained of the faintest abatement in the observance due to the *châteline* of Mote.

One out of all that great household chose to follow Bessie’s fortunes,—her French maid, Rosalie. That young person was singularly free from prejudices, and was by no means punctilious as to the virtue of her mistresses ; sagely reasoning, that liberality in morals generally entails liberality in perquisites, so that the social bankruptcy of a great dame ought to make her waiting-maid’s fortune.

“ *Le caractère de madame est un peu vif—*” Rosalie confessed to a friend and compatriot—“ *et elle a la langue passablement déliée. Mais elle est bonne diablesse au fond. Et j’aime mieux les diablesse que les béguéules. Va !* ”

The threatenings of storm had all passed away, and it was a faultless morning when Mrs Maskelyne came down to the carriage that was to take her into Torrcaster.

She was pale, certainly ; that might be accounted for by sleep-

lessness, for preparations for departure had occupied her throughout the night. But on her beautiful face there was never a sign of shame or sorrow; as she walked through the hall, for the last time, her foot faltered no more than when she crossed it first as the mistress of Mote. And she seemed to have imparted somewhat of her own spirit to her unhappy father. If Mr Standen could not bear himself with dignity under his reverses, he could at least refrain from betraying unmanly weakness. Even his ludicrous attempt at bravado, as he followed his daughter out—whistling a low defiant tune, and returning the servants' salutes with a careless condescension—was better than the drivelling of some hours ago.

It was an open barouche that took those two to Torrcaster station. As it drove off Mrs Maskelyne rose up on her feet, and—resting her hand on the hood—looked back long and steadfastly. There is always a vague charm attaching to objects seen surely for the very last time, even if we have not loved them well. Perhaps Bessie's unromantic nature was not altogether proof against this, just at that moment. Certain it is, that the grand old house, and the stately demesne around, had never seemed to her so fair as they did on that especial morning. As she thought how all this had been won—and lost, she could not stifle a deep, regretful sigh. The next instant she laughed out loud at her own weakness, and kissed her hand in a saucy adieu. As she sat down she began to sing softly to herself the last lines of a ballad that was very famous once. She had a good clear untutored voice; and Byron's was about the only poetry that Bessie cared for:

With thee, my bark, I'll quickly fly,
Across the ocean brine:
Nor care what home thou bear'st me to,
So not again to mine.

"What on earth are you singing about?" Mr Standen growled savagely. "Are you satisfied with the mischief you and your —— cousin have done between you? I wish the devil had taken him before he ever showed himself here!"

To which his daughter retorted that—"singing was better than whining any day; that if he wanted to curse Kit, he could wait

and do it to the other's face; and that if he couldn't talk without making himself disagreeable, he might as well hold his tongue."

Which irreverent advice Mr Standen thought it prudent to follow.

In this wise, the glossy bright-eyed kestrel, whom tiercels' training could not reclaim, shook off silver bells, and velvet hood, and brodered jesses; and fled away—to consort, henceforward for evermore, with gleds, and hawks, and such birds of prey as make their nests deep in Bohemian forests, or in the desolate places of the Wilderness that girdles the frontier of the reputable world.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

EARLY in the spring of that same year, Mrs Flemyng went to visit some relations dwelling in the midland shires; and stayed a week in Town, on her way back to Warleigh, which was virtually her home.

On the very evening of her return, Kate was struck by a marked alteration in her mother's manner: at first she attributed this to the fatigue of the journey; but, when the morrow and the next day brought no change for the better, she grew seriously alarmed, and confessed it to Seyton. He too had not failed to remark that something was seriously amiss with Mrs Flemyng. The plaintive air of mock-martyrdom had entirely vanished; in its stead there was a settled depression, painfully real. Mrs Flemyng was never garrulous, but she had become unnaturally silent of late; and would sit, by the hour together, gazing wistfully into the fire, or out of a window, with tears welling slowly up into her eyes.

In reply to Kate's anxious questions, she would only allow

that 'she had not been feeling quite strong lately;' nevertheless she would not hear of calling in medical aid.

The Seytons were naturally in a great strait of perplexity. Twice or thrice in their mutual speculations there was mention of the prodigal son's name; but there appeared no valid reason for connecting him with Mrs Flemyng's low spirits. He had taken chambers and an *atelier* in Town, and was supposed to be painting in a vague desultory sort of way. His name appeared tolerably often in the chronicle of banquets and balls, and they heard accidentally of his having become a member of a certain club noted for high play; but no definite rumour to Vincent's disadvantage had penetrated to Warleigh.

In the face of all this, the Seytons could only see their way clearly thus far. It was evident that their Norway trip must be given up for this year. Kate would never have forgiven herself, if she had dreamt of leaving her mother in her present state. As Tom directed the letter in which he resigned his rod, his remark to his wife was eminently philosophical.

"Never mind, pet, we shall deserve a double allowance of luck next season: I shouldn't wonder if we landed the 'king-fish.' And we shall enjoy it all the more for missing one turn. Besides, we've had so much sport one way or another, that it's about time we did some work; there's no better work that I know of than seeing your friends through trouble. We'll try and help the poor Madre through hers, whatever it may be."

Yet, as the weather waxed warmer, Mrs Flemyng's mood seemed to brighten: to be cheerful was not in her nature; but her moral barometer rose steadily again towards the mild meek melancholy, which, in her, was synonymous with Set Fair.

Tom began to repent himself somewhat of his over-hasty self-denial (the vacant rod on that famous river had been snapped up the instant it was known to be free); but, before he had time to grumble, the catastrophe at Mote occurred. Thenceforward he never regretted that he had stayed at home.

Three weeks or so might have passed since the events chronicled in the last chapter. Brian Maskelyne had departed for a long continental tour, which was to begin in the Tyrol and end—he himself knew not where. The first uproar of the scandal

that had set all the Marlshire tattlers buzzing like bees round an overturned hive, had begun to die away in vague intermittent rumours. Seyton had begun to talk of taking Kate up to Town for a fortnight, to help him to get rid of his Derby winnings, "in a fashionable manner" (for, though Crusader only ran a good second, Tom had contrived to make nearly £200 out of his 'long shot' by judicious hedging); and Mrs Flemyng had half promised to accompany them; when, suddenly, all plans were deranged at Warleigh.

On a certain morning some farm-business had called Seyton early a-field; so Kate was breakfasting alone with her mother when the post came in. Before Mrs Flemyng had read the first page of her first letter, she dropped it with a faint cry; and covering her face with her handkerchief, fell to weeping convulsively.

Kate partly guessed at the truth as her eye lighted on a well-known handwriting; but she guessed not all, till she had taken up the letter, in obedience to a sign from Mrs Flemyng. A very brief glance at its contents was enough to startle and shock her scarcely less than her mother had been, though she did not give way so completely.

It was a petition, or rather a demand, from Vincent for the advance of several thousands, to pay off pressing play-debts, followed by dark and deadly hints as to the consequences of refusal. A cruel letter—had it been addressed to the sternest of paternal despots; unutterably base—addressed to a weak doting woman.

Little by little, and word by word, broken by much stormy sobbing, the poor lady's confession was made. As she passed through Town, Vincent had induced her to sell out a large sum (though far less than his present demand) to assist him in clearing off *all* his liabilities, as he said; promising that this should be the very last tax on her generosity. She forced herself to believe him at the time, but was haunted afterwards with divers sharp misgivings. Of late, on the principle of 'no news being good news,' she had become more tranquil and hopeful; so that the blow fell, now, almost unexpectedly.

Kate was equal to any ordinary emergency, but not to such a

one as this. All sisterly love was swallowed up, for the moment, in hot honest indignation; yet she had sense enough to remember that the expression of this would not lighten her mother's sorrows; so she fell back upon the last resource of the 'ministering angel'—sympathetic tears; and the two sat there, making their moan helplessly together, till Seyton returned.

His presence restored something like order to the dejected family council, and he was very soon in possession of all the circumstances.

As he read the first part of the letter, he frowned heavily; when he came to the last, his face settled into the same expression that it had worn, on that evening long ago, when Vincent Flemyng brought the tidings of his Oxford disaster; and Tom "couldn't see the pull of stage-tricks on society, especially when women's nerves are to be played upon."

"It's a bad, black case from end to end," he said. "And *that's* about the worst bit in it" (he struck the especial page sharply with his finger). "It would have been cowardly to hint at such things, even if Vincent had ever seriously meditated them; which I don't believe he ever did. I can't help your both thinking me hard and brutal. I don't believe that he has ever looked at suicide more nearly than I have done myself. I give him credit for that much of common sense, at all events. But it's no use abusing him; and it's cruel to do so to you, mamma. Have you made up your mind what to do about this? I won't give any advice, unless you positively require it."

"The money must be paid," Mrs Flemyng answered, in a weak broken voice, but more firmly than could have been expected. "It should be paid, if I had to live on your charity and Kate's to the end of my days; and it's not so bad as that yet. It isn't the money I'm grieving over. I know I'm doing sinfully wrong in paying these gambling debts; it will only make him more rash and reckless. But perhaps my boy does not guess how he has made his poor mother suffer. Oh, Tom, won't you try to make him understand this? It might save him still. It's no use my writing. I'm afraid my letters only weary him now. And he used to look for them so eagerly! But you will see him, will you not, and speak gently to him? He must have

one soft spot left in his heart: *I* could always find it—once.”

Tom shook his head, sadly. But he had not the heart to dissuade the unhappy mother from her purpose, nor to tell her that she was only deceiving herself now, as she had deceived herself since her spoilt darling grew out of childhood.

“I thought how it would be,” he said, with a scarcely-suppressed groan. “It’s clear there’s no use in my saying anything, except—that I’ll go up to Town, and arrange all this; and do my very best to bring Vincent to his senses; or at all events to bring him back here. I know—never mind why, *I do* know it—that I’m about the last person likely to soften him. You two may possibly do it. Anyhow, this *must* be the last of his gambling follies. If he can only be brought to understand this there will be some good done. Now I’ll leave you to Kate for awhile, mamma. When you feel strong enough, I’ll come back, and take your instructions to Deacon. He had better manage this of course; though it will be a heavy day’s work for him.”

So Kate sent off a few lines to her brother, merely stating that his letter had been received, and that the money would be forthcoming within the week; she said nothing about her mother, except that the latter was too unwell to write. She had not intended to add another word; but, just before she folded the sheet, she did add a postscript, almost involuntarily.

“Oh Vincent—may God forgive you! I don’t think *I* ever can.”

Nevertheless, when Tom started for Town, early on the ensuing morning, Kate was moved to intercession, by a certain look on her husband’s face—a set stony look, such as she, at least, had never seen there.

“Won’t you promise me to deal gently with him,” she whispered. “For poor mamma’s sake, if not for mine? At the worst, you will not get angry, even if he should be provoking and ungrateful?”

And Tom gave the required promise, readily, sealing it with the farewell salute.

His first interview was with Mr Deacon; nor was this terminated without a certain amount of trouble and annoyance. The old lawyer at first absolutely refused to have anything to

do with the business, or to exercise the general power of attorney that he held; and spoke plainly enough, albeit departing not from his wonted staid urbanity.

"I gave Mrs Flemyng fair warning," he said, "when she came to me, about a similar matter, early in the spring. She did not attempt to conceal from me where the money was going to. I should have guessed it if she had. Then, I took the privilege—I trust I did not exceed it—of an old friend, as I believe she is good enough to consider me. I told her that, in spite of all she had heard, this would *not* be the last call upon her; but that such calls would be repeated so long as there was a fraction of her fortune left to meet them. I told her that her son would have some faint excuse for his extravagance, and—I was bound to say—vices (for I hold gambling one of the worst of these), if he found his demands so readily complied with. Furthermore, I besought her if, at any future time, she saw fit to disregard my advice, at least not to make me *participem criminis*. Hard words are seldom to be palliated, Mr Seyton; least of all, hard words in a lady's presence. Yet, I think there are exceptions to this, as to all other earthly things."

Thus having perorated, the ancient took snuff thrice with a kind of indignant emphasis; and paused solemnly for a reply.

"On my honour I think you were right," Tom answered. "It's just what I'd have said myself to Mrs Flemyng, if I had only had half your pluck. But those women do pretty much as they like with me; the proof of which is, that—I'm here to-day. The worst of it is, your refusing to act will not stop the business; it will only entail a fresh power of attorney, and further worry to Mrs Flemyng, who is ill able to bear it. It seems to me that, if these things are to be done at all, they are best done quickly."

"*Bis dat, qui cito dat*," Mr Deacon murmured. He always kept a stock on hand of trite Latin quotations, not much augmented since his Westminster days; and rarely missed a chance of 'turning over' that modest capital.

"Exactly so," Tom assented, vaguely. "As the case stands,

it would be a kindness to all of us, if you would undertake it. Indeed, I ask it as a personal favour."

The courtly old lawyer bowed his white head, statelyly.

"If you put it in that light, Mr Seyton, I have not another word to say. The money shall be ready to-morrow"

So, with a few more words of special import, they parted.

Late on that same afternoon, after an unsuccessful attempt to find his brother-in-law at home, Tom was walking up Piccadilly. With that swift springy rustic stride of his—so different from the deliberate pace of the town-bred loungers—he went slipping past the main-stream of foot-traffic, now setting eastwards; till, nearly opposite Devonshire House, he overtook Mr Castlemaine.

Now, Cis had a great respect for the squirearchy in general, and considered Seyton of Warleigh a very favourable specimen of the order: so his greeting was far more cordial than might have been expected from their slight acquaintance; so cordial was it indeed, that Tom felt encouraged to prolong the conversation, with a purpose.

"If you are not in a great hurry, and have no particular engagement," he said, "perhaps you could spare me five minutes?"

"Twenty if you like," the other answered. "I'm too old to be ever in a hurry; and I've no business on hand, beyond a rubber or two before dinner; which, I dare say, may be postponed with benefit both to my purse and appetite. We'll turn out of this turmoil, though, if you please: serious conversation is out of the question here."

So the two crossed the roadway and went down the steps leading into the Park. Directly they were on level ground Seyton began to speak; coming straight to the point, as was his wont.

"I hate tale-telling out of school as much as you can do, Mr Castlemaine. But I don't think the expression applies here. As to the main features of the case, we are only too well-informed. But I want to be sure that we know the worst. I am going to put a question to you, that perhaps I have no right to ask: I shall be greatly obliged if you will answer it

frankly and fearlessly; but, if you decline to do so, I cannot feel aggrieved. I believe you are constantly meeting my brother-in-law, though you may not be especially intimate. Will you give me a candid opinion about him?"

Cecil looked steadfastly, yet not unkindly, into the other's face; while, for several seconds, he seemed to deliberate with himself as to the manner of his reply.

"Yes: you are perfectly justified in putting that question," he said, at last, with the air of a judge giving a knotty point in a counsel's favour. "You like plain-speaking, Mr Seyton, I know; and you shall have it. I consider that Vincent Flemyng is going to the devil, as rapidly and recklessly as it is possible for a civilized man to go. In all my experience—a long and varied one unhappily—I cannot call to mind a more hopeless case."

Tom's countenance fell; he loved plain-speaking, certainly, but he had not reckoned on such a downright dose of it. One may be very fond of cold water, but an ice-cold *douche* is apt to stagger the stoutest of us, taken unawares.

"I hope—I trust—it is not so bad as that," he said. "He has lost frightfully at play we know. Indeed, I have come up for the special purpose of settling those claims. He has said nothing of any trade debts: perhaps I may be able to help him out of these, without troubling his poor mother any further: she is almost heart-broken as it is. But there is a limit to everything. We cannot sit tamely by, and see Mrs Flemyng beggared to feed Vincent's gambling mania. These supplies are the very last. He must change his life entirely for many a day to come, and live quietly, either at Warleigh or abroad. Even *he* will see the necessity of this; indeed, I have promised not to return home without him." Tom checked himself here, with rather an awkward laugh. "You must forgive me; I'm boring you with our family affair, as if you were an old friend."

"I take it as a great compliment," the other said; and really he looked as if he did so. "I wish, from the bottom of my heart, that I could give any advice that would be useful. But you are quite wide of my meaning. Those who have lived my life are apt to look upon mere money-scrapes only too

lightly. Many worse things may befall us than unfraudulent bankruptcy. There is no question of dishonour in this case, I dare avow. I don't know the amount of Mr Flemyng's losses; for they were chiefly incurred at private play (whist and *écarté* are not fast enough for some of that set; they *will* have lansquenet and unlimited loo). But, I believe, no one doubted that they would eventually be paid. I was thinking of other entanglements. You say, 'you will take your brother-in-law home;' and keep him there, I conclude? If you do that, you will have worked nearly as great a miracle as if you had raised one from the dead. For all good and useful purposes, a man might as well be lying in his coffin as bondsman to Flora Dorrillon."

There was something too much of hyperbole in these last sentences; but the earnestness of Cecil's manner saved them from seeming absurd. Seyton gazed at the speaker in a blank bewildered way. To the honest country squire these things were like glimpses into a new and evil world.

"The—the woman we met at Charteris Royal, you mean? Yes, I dare say, she might be dangerous." And Tom's face flushed guiltily, as he remembered how his own cool blood had been stirred by the syren-notes of *L'Andalouse*. "But I cannot realise such fearful fascination as this. Why—I was fool enough to rejoice, at the time, that Vincent seemed to have got clear of another scrape; a foolish flirtation with Mrs Charteris."

"Mrs Charteris!" the other retorted with some scorn. "She's only a thorough-paced coquette, who can take right good care of herself, and will never do much harm to others. The Dorrillon is of quite another stamp. I can't tell you why she is so fatal, any more than I can explain why some plants are poisonous. I only know the effect of her influence on certain men. By Gad, sir—you might have supposed they were 'possessed.' They seemed to lose all discrimination between right and wrong, and to forget that there ever were such things as natural affections. Did you know Livingstone of Kirton? You did not? Well: there was stuff enough in him to make half-a-dozen modern exquisites. That couldn't save him. There was

a black story in his life that no one got at the truth of; and a burden was laid on his shoulders, that bent them—broad as they were. The Dorrillon was at the bottom of it all. She was hardly past girlhood then. What chance do you suppose a man of Flemyng's calibre would have with her, *now*?"

Seyton hung his head despondently—he was quite in strange waters; and felt the absurdity of arguing with such an experienced pilot as Castlemaine.

"How long has the *liaison* lasted?" he asked in a low broken voice.

"It's not exactly a *liaison*, in the vulgar sense of the word," the other replied. "At least, I fancy not. Though I don't profess to know more than other people, I'd lay heavy odds that Mr Flemyng never has been, and never will be, what is commonly called 'a favoured lover.' But don't deceive yourself, or think that you will find your way easier for this. The Dorrillon would not be the witch she is, if she could not make her thralls feed on shadow for substance, till they die of famine. You can but try, at all events. Your best chance is that I've a sort of idea she's getting weary of your brother-in-law. Frankly—I don't wonder at it. I wish you all success; and, if I can help in any way, command me. My best address is White's."

The other thanked him heartily; and then each went his way—Tom with a heavier heart than ever. Neither did Castlemaine feel in cue for a rubber. He walked slowly to and fro in a quiet part of the Mall, till it was time to dress for dinner; and, curiously enough, his appetite did not seem improved by the unwonted constitutional.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A LAST CHANCE.

SEYTON learnt at Vincent Flemyng's lodgings that the latter had gone into the country for the day, and would not return till late at night ; so he contented himself with making an appointment for the following afternoon ; and spent the rest of the evening at his club, in the company of certain special cronies, who were wont to muster festively, on the occasion of Tom's rare visits to the metropolis.

But over the modest banquet there hung an unwonted gloom. The rumour of Flemyng's recent losses had been noised abroad ; and more than one man present guessed at the cause of their friend's unexpected appearance, while Seyton himself was by no means in his usual spirits.

The troubles that he had seen—if not felt—within the last two years, up to which time his simple life had been singularly serene, were beginning to tell on his hardy nature. Certain maladies of mind and body work much alike in this wise ; they touch the healthy athlete who has never known sickness till now, far more sharply than the fanciful hypochondriac or the feeble valetudinarian. If Seyton's own roof-tree was still unsinged, the fire had made wild work, of late, with his neighbours' dwellings ; and, from the disaster of the last of these unlucky Ucalegons, he was divided by a thin party-wall. But if he could not contribute materially to the conviviality of the evening, he was careful to abstain from spoiling it. So he kept his own counsel ; neither did his friends think it well to question him.

After visiting Lincoln's Inn, and his own banker's, Seyton came punctually to his appointment the next day ; and found his brother-in-law alone. As might have been expected, their meeting was the reverse of cordial. Tom was a miserable dissembler at the best of times, and Flemyng had evidently wrapped himself up in defiant sullenness—the last refuge of a nature too weak to own itself in the wrong.

After a few words of purely formal greeting, Tom went straight to business.

"That is the sum you named, as sufficient to cover all your play-debts?" he asked; consulting a written paper.

The other nodded assent, silently, after a careless glance at the figures.

"Here it is," Tom went on, drawing a roll of notes from his breast-pocket. "Will you be good enough to count it, and sign this receipt when you have done so? Deacon says it must be placed in your mother's deed-box, as a matter of form."

The other did as he was bidden. As he pushed the signed receipt across the table, he was constrained to attempt some ungracious, reluctant thanks.

"Of course, I'm very grateful to my mother, and to you, too, for the trouble—"

"Don't thank me," Tom broke in. "I wasn't consulted in this matter. What my advice would have been, had it been asked for, is of no consequence now. If you wish to thank your mother, you can do so by deeds better than by words. She is very miserable, and would be more so if I returned without you. These things are soon settled, with the money in your hand. Surely you will be ready to go down to Warleigh with me to-morrow, early—if not by to-night's mail. You need fear no annoyance from me: you know the others well enough to feel safe with them."

"I could not possibly get away to-morrow," Vincent answered. "I'll come down for a day or so as soon as I can manage it. But I can't fix any definite time."

"Can you be serious?" Seyton asked, with more of sadness than anger. "And I thought I was safe in promising to bring you home with me!"

The other glanced up, with the old unpleasant look—half malignant, half-timorous—in his eyes.

"You're never safe in promising for other people. If you mean it was a condition—there's the money on the table. You can take *that* back with you."

Now, sooth to say, Seyton had been prompted more than once, during the last forty-eight hours, to make this especial stipulation

before actually parting with the notes. But his instructions did not warrant this; and poor Tom had absurd scruples about 'doing evil that good might come;' added to a nervous horror of dark and tortuous ways. So he put the temptation aside now, as he had done before. But the effort chafed him somewhat; and, before the other's cold callous selfishness Tom's choler began to rise: his brows were bent when he spoke again.

"I tell you that your mother is really ill: and that I will not answer for the consequence of further mental suffering. Do you still refuse to accompany me, or to name an early day for your coming?"

Even Vincent Flemýng was fain to lower his voice—for very shame—as he made reply; nevertheless his tone was dogged and firm.

"I do refuse, whatever the consequences may be."

Seyton's promise to his wife was utterly forgotten, as he rose up, with a wrathful scorn on his face and in his clear grey eyes.

"Don't suppose that all this is a mystery to me. When half London could guess it, why should not I? I only heard the truth when I heard that Flora Dorrillon's slaves were possessed with devils. What else could make a man let his mother die, and his sister pine, sooner than lose three days of a wanton's company. Sit down—you madman—you *shall* hear me out (his strong arm thrust Vincent back into the chair, from which the latter had sprung in a sudden fury). I know what you would say—she is pure in fact. As God hears me, I hold the woman who sins daily, from temperament—ay, even the outcast who sells herself nightly, for gold—higher than the pseudo-adulteress, who has made you the laughing-stock of the town."

Never, in all his life, had Tom Seyton been so nearly eloquent; the composite word in the last sentence would scarcely have occurred to him at another moment; but his fiery indignation made him speak as one inspired.

Flemýng's face had grown deathly white, and utterly disfigured with passion—passion that choked him, so as to prevent the articulation of a single intelligible word: his hand and wrist quivered like a bulrush, as he pointed to the door. A moment's reflection caused Seyton to feel somewhat ashamed and conscience-

stricken. It was clear he had made a false step in yielding to his honest impulses. What would you have? Even born ambassadors are but mortals, and our friend was never meant for diplomacy. However, he had now gone too far to recede; the words that had been spoken could neither be unsaid nor atoned for, even if he had wished to do either. Scarcely suppressing a groan, Tom owned to himself that he had no more business there; and that his best course, for the moment, was to depart speedily, before more harm was done.

"Look here, Vincent," he said, in quite an altered tone, "I spoke unadvisedly a minute ago; and I'm sorry for it, though I can't retract a word. But I'm as cool now as I ever was in my life. It just comes to this. If you choose to return with me to-morrow, or if you come to Warleigh within any reasonable time—free of this entanglement—you shall be as welcome as if nothing had happened. But so long as your present intimacy with Lady Dorrillon subsists, you shall never see Kate, with my free will. I don't forget that she is your sister, but I'm bound to remember that she is the mother of my children. You needn't answer me now, when there is bitterness between us. I shall not go down till to-morrow afternoon. If you think better of these things meanwhile, you may know where a line will find me."

Even as he spoke Seyton moved towards the door—very slowly; for, in despite of all, he was loth to depart without drawing one word of repentance or concession from the man he had come to save. But the twin-devils of Luxury and Anger, who held Flemyng in their grip, would not let go their prey. Though the first tumult of his fury had subsided, his heart was not a whit more accessible to gratitude, or penitence, or shame. He only averted his downcast head sullenly, and signified, with an impatient gesture, that he would be left alone.

Seyton had nearly reached the threshold, when he stopped suddenly, as if he had forgotten something. He came back, and placed a small roll of notes on the table, close to the pile that lay as they had been counted.

"There are my Crusader winnings," he said; "every shilling of them. I meant you should have that money, from the moment I heard of your misfortunes. You're not the less welcome, for

all that's been said and done. I hope it may be of some use to you; it would be none to me; so you need have no scruples. I couldn't spend it—or keep it either—as things stand. I'm glad I remembered. I should have been miserable if I had carried that stuff away with me."

Vincent Flemyng—distraught as he was with evil passions, and debased by selfishness—was not wholly untouched by the simple-minded kindness of the action and words. For a brief instant he liked Seyton better than he had ever done in his life, and felt half inclined to call him back, and accept—at least for the nonce—the moderate conditions of peace. But it was not to be.

Every Tyrolese or Alpine traveller knows those steep smooth grassy hill-faces—more dangerous, from their very seductiveness, than cliff, or ice-crag, or snow-slope—that have so many deaths to answer for. In these there is always one point, which if the victim has reached, it is not only impossible for him to retrace his steps, but equally impossible to arrest, were it for one second, his progress to destruction. People who have witnessed such accidents say that this slow irresistible downward impulse is the most horrible part of the whole catastrophe.

To such a stage in the moral precipice Vincent Flemyng had come. Whilst he paused, irresolute, the door closed softly; and so from the doomed man was cut off the very last chance of repentance—the very last ray of hope on this side of Eternity.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"WHO CHECKS AT ME, TO DEATH IS DIGHT."

You remember, I dare say, that sad strange story of the Scots lord, who early in life lost an eye, by accident, in a fencing-bout; and, years afterwards, was asked by the French king—

"Does the man still live who wrought that injury?"

The debonair monarch meant nothing more by his idle question than the words conveyed. But it was fatal to three lives,

and brought shame and sorrow on more great houses than one. The crack-brained Baron interpreted it into a slur upon his honour. So he went home straightway ; and, with the help of his servant, stabbed the unlucky master-of-arms to death in open day ; for which murder both he and his accomplice paid on the scaffold. These good-natured blundering people are perpetually dropping firebrands in dangerous places, and afterwards would freely sacrifice themselves to extinguish the flames.

Speaking awhile ago—in some heat as you will remember—Seyton let fall an expression, injudicious, to say the least of it ; could he have guessed *how* injudicious, sooner than have uttered it he would have bitten his tongue through.

"The laughing-stock of half the town."

Cannot you imagine what manner of sermon the Devil would preach to a nature like Vincent Flem yng's on such a text as this ?

For a long half-hour after he was left alone the unhappy man sate brooding over his position and his fancied wrongs, till he worked himself up into a savage dogged desperation. In that frame of mind even weak and cowardly people become very dangerous ; and it is thus that such attain, not rarely, an evil eminence in crime. After a while he rose, with the air of one who has come to a settled purpose, and went forth ; first casting the larger bundle of notes carelessly into a drawer, which he did not take the trouble to lock. But the smaller roll (which Seyton had laid down last) he thrust into his breast-pocket.

It was not very far from Flem yng's chambers to Plantagenet Square, where the family-mansion of the Dorrillions loomed, large, amongst its grand and gloomy fellows. He took the least frequented of the several roads thither, and encountered not more than two or three familiar faces by the way.

It so chanced that one of these was Lord Ranksborough's.

Though they were by no means in the same set, they were in the habit of meeting pretty constantly, but there was not a whit more cordiality between them than when they parted at Charteris Royal. No second play-tournament of the like importance had come off, but upon the few occasions when they had been thus opposed to each other Flem yng had invariably risen a heavy loser. So a gambler's superstition was added to the other sources of his ran-

cour. Denzil did not care to dissemble a sort of contemptuous dislike; but, as a rule, he contented himself with ignoring the other, after the placid provoking fashion above alluded to.

He passed on, now, with a careless nod and a brief muttered salutation. Of neither of these did Vincent take any heed; and the black spiteful look that gave point to the rudeness, did somewhat astonish even the imperturbable peer, who was unconscious of having given any fresh cause of offence. But he only smiled slightly, and lounged languidly onwards, musing as he went.

"What the deuce is up in that quarter now, I wonder? He's an ill-conditioned beggar at the best of times; but I never saw that look in his eyes before, nor in any other's that I know of. Yes, I did once; in Transylvania, when we found that wolf-cub in the pit-fall. He must have been harder hit than any one gave him credit for. Or perhaps the Dorrillon drama is about coming to an end; and the *jeune premier* don't fancy the prospect of being turned adrift. I should rather like to get at the truth of all that story. Marion keeps something back, of course: women always do. They wouldn't be half such sport without their little reticences."

With which philosophical reflection Denzil let the subject 'slide.'

Lady Dorrillon's custom of an afternoon was perfectly well known to all her intimates; and it was never varied unless for stringent reasons. She was too wise to take undue liberties with her magnificent constitution; and so was wont, throughout the season, to come home early from her drive, that she might recruit herself for the fatigues of the evening. During this period of *quasi siesta*, only a very few were admitted to her boudoir; on which limited list Vincent's name was duly inscribed. So he was conducted thither without pause or question.

That presence-chamber was very like a score of others that you and I may have seen; but the colours in the costly furniture and hangings were rather sober than brilliant; and the light was more subdued than is usual in such apartments. Certainly, this was not so regulated by the defensive cunning of coquetry; for Flora's superb beauty need not have shrunk from displaying itself under the fullest glare of lamp or sun. In other saloons she met the fair company whom she entertained so royally. But this especial

room she kept for *causeries intimes*, if not for real repose ; and she held that, for either of these purposes, semi-obscurity was useful.

Flemyng found Lady Dorrillon alone. She was reclining on a low broad couch, as if sleepy or weary. When he entered, her half-closed eyelids were lifted with a rather petulant sigh ; and she scarcely disturbed herself sufficiently to motion him to a seat placed conveniently close to her shoulder. Before he sat down—whilst the servant was still in the room—Vincent spoke hurriedly.

“Will you be ‘not at home’ for one half-hour ? I *must* ask for so much of your time. I promise not to detain you longer.”

The words would have been rash and ill-advised, even had they been warranted by greater familiarity than existed between those two. And so Lady Dorrillon evidently thought ; for her broad white brow contracted at first, and her lip curled ; but suddenly her purpose seemed to change.

“I am not at home, till I ring again ;” she said to the servant, who waited in the doorway

It was characteristic of the woman that—in spite of her audacious coquetries, and reckless independence—she should have been able to maintain her position so thoroughly in the eyes of her *valetaille*. The terrible *Vehme*, who deliberate below-stairs, had set no cross against her name ; the austere matron in England could boast no more deferential or better ordered household. And this state of things never can prevail where a single menial is supposed to connive at a guilty secret. So the man went his way, without a suspicion on his mind, beyond a vague idea that the visitor—having got into some serious scrape—had come to consult his mistress thereupon, or perchance to seek her aid.

“What is the terrible secret ?” Lady Dorrillon asked, when the door was fairly closed. “For of course there is some fresh trouble?”

She put the question with a calm indifferent curiosity—not with the nervous eagerness of a woman jealous even of a sorrow that she does not share.

He answered with a forced smile.

“Nothing fresh—nothing new. Perhaps that’s the reason I’m sick and weary of it all—so weary that, one way or the other, it shall end to-day.”

She too smiled by that same sign ; but her smile was cold and fine.

"More cruelty of the cards? It's only wonderful that you have not grown tired sooner of being persecuted. I believe Fox thought losing at play the second pleasure in life. But you are no more like him than—I am like the Duchess Georgiana."

"You're wrong for once," he broke in, rudely. "If I have been losing I can pay it, without troubling any one—you least of all; though you did help me once. I've not come to ask you for money; but for a simple answer to a simple question. And that answer I mean to have."

Her scarlet lip curled, more and more ominously; and into her eyes there came a dangerous light. But he was not to be warned, and went on in the same hard brusque tone—

"How much longer is this farce to last? How much longer do you expect me to live this dog's life, with less than a dog's reward? For you do pet and caress that snarling spaniel of yours sometimes; and I only get smiles and looks, that I dare swear are given to a score of other fools besides. I've served you long enough for nought. And I'll not be put off with fair words, now that I've come to ask for my wages."

"You spoke of 'farce' first—not I; remember"—she said. "If it is a farce, there is the less reason for that high-tragedy manner. I tell you frankly—it don't become you: and it is not at all to my taste. So you are actually jealous of poor Rupert? Well: you have been so with less cause. As to how long this is to last—it hardly depends on me; unless you were to persist in being rude and disagreeable. Then, perhaps, I might have a decided opinion on the subject. You had better speak plainly. What is it that you do require of me?"

He did speak plainly, with a vengeance; so plainly that few women—not wholly lost to self-respect—would have heard him to the end; so plainly, that the words cannot be written down here. He was nearly beside himself when he came in, you will remember; and the careless insolence of her last speech fanned the smouldering madness into flame. But Flora listened without a frown, or blush, or a vestige of emotion.

"I will forgive your language—" she said; "simply because you have made my answer so easy. I answer: No. No—now, and for evermore. The best hope that I held out to you was, that

‘you might try and win me.’ That hope has been over this many a day; only you would not see it. I promised you too ‘a fair field and no favour;’ and I have kept my word. I hold myself clear, from this hour. It is not my fault that you have failed—utterly and irretrievably ”

The mingled malignity and anguish, that convulsed his face, were terrible to see.

“Then it’s all over? You cast me off at a moment’s notice, after—after all that has passed? And you do not fear the consequences? And you know that I am desperate?”

“I know nothing, except that this is the last time we meet *here*; or anywhere, unless it be in general society. No living man ever spoke to me twice—or ever shall speak—as you have spoken to-day. Why should I fear consequences? You can talk about me of course. I hope you will find some one to listen, if not to sympathize. A whole Book of Lamentations has been published about me already; and yet—I survive. I don’t see what further harm you can do. I fancy you have no letters of mine, that would compromise me, even with Sir Marma- duke. Poor Marion! I wonder if she has grown wiser for the lesson you gave her?”

The light broke in upon Flemmyng all at once—not in a steady ray, but with a horrible blinding flash; he threw his hands up, clasping them tightly over his eyes, and sat so for several seconds; when he withdrew them, both cheek and brow bore traces of the pressure. He just managed to stammer out a few disjointed words—

“My God—I see it all now: tricked—fooled—cheated from the first moment”—

And broke down, in a choking sob.

Not even then did La Belle Dame Sans Merci abate the disdain of her satiric smile.

“Yes; I think you guess the truth, at last—” she said. “Marion Charteris came to me, in her distress, and I promised to help her, and to get those letters back, at any reasonable cost. It is hard for you to hear those things now. But—did you think to escape scot free, after having tried to traffic on a woman’s weakness, and an old family’s honour? I did deceive you, in allowing you to

think it possible that you should ever be more to me than you were at that moment. But I did not mean to cheat you. In one way, those letters were fairly bought and sold. Wait an instant."

She opened a secret drawer in an escritoire placed close to her elbow, on the opposite side of the couch from that on which Flemyng sat, and took out a slip of paper.

"You know your own hand-writing? Here is the acknowledgment that my lawyer took, when he helped you out of your difficulties. I was very glad to be of use to you then; I have never grudged it since; and, when we came to an explanation, as we were sure to do sooner or later. I always intended—this."

The paper was scattered in shreds, before she had finished speaking.

If Flora Dorrillon could have seen what was passing within the other's breast, she would surely, I think, have refrained from that finishing blow; or, at least, have dealt it more tenderly. But Vincent Flemyng was fast lapsing into that state of mind which finds its parallel in the last stages of certain bodily punishments; where prolonged torture does eventually produce insensibility to pain. He made no answer now, but sat like one bewildered, drawing his breath in quick laboured gasps.

Flora looked at him in some surprise: she had despised the man too cordially to believe him capable of such strong emotion. In despite of her ruthless cynicism she was a thorough woman, after all. Mental agony she could witness unmoved; but she began to relent at the sight of evident physical suffering.

"We will let bygones be bygones, if you like," she said, in a softer tone. "At all events, we will forget that hard words have passed between us to-day. The world is wide enough for us both; we may meet as hundreds of people do who have no great respect or liking for each other. My philosophy is equal to this; and so will yours be, when you have thought things over coolly."

Flemyng rose to his feet, swaying to and fro like a drunken man; in his eyes was the same savage helpless look, which Ranksborough had aptly likened to the glare of a trapped wild beast. Flora Dorrillon was absolutely proof against physical fear; nevertheless, she felt glad, just then, that a bell rope lay within reach of her hand: she pulled it without an instant's hesitation.

Vincent broke out into a ghastly laugh.

"You needn't be afraid," he said. "Did you think I was going to spoil your beauty? I couldn't, if I would; the Devil takes too good care of his own. I've time enough to say—all I want to say"

With that, he leant down and spoke a few sentences in a hoarse suppressed tone, holding her arm fast the while. It was long before the firm white flesh lost the purple finger-prints; it was longer yet, before Flora forgot that hissing whisper, and the hideous words it conveyed; waking at night, with a start, she used to fancy that she heard it again, close to her ear.

Now, all cursing is evil; but evil in degrees. There is the habitual expletive, meaningless if not harmless, perpetually exploding, like some unsavoury firework; such as the godly Scotch dame condemned—with a qualification.

"Our John does sweer awfu'—" she averred. "But it must be owned it's a gran' set-off to conversation."

There is the coarse execration of sudden anger; not deliberately malignant, and oftentimes repented of as soon as it is spoken, which may be compared to the crackling of flame amongst thorns. Again—there is the slow intense imprecation of mortal hate or despair, into which a sinful soul casts all its strength of will; when each syllable falls like a drop of molten iron, and lies where it falls—burning, burning. Any man who has been forced to listen to one of these last—even if it were not levelled at himself—will be apt to be disagreeably haunted thereby

Did you ever read 'The Lay of the Brown Rosary?' If so, amongst the touches of weird horror that abound in that wonderful ballad, you will surely remember this verse—

A nun in the east wall was buried alive,
Who mocked at the priest when he called her to shrive,
And shrieked such a curse, that a stone took her breath,
The old abbess sank backwards, and swooned unto death,
With an Ave half-spoken.

Not more than a hundred words, perhaps, escaped just then, from those white, writhing lips of Vincent Flemyng's; but each one was heavy with venomous blasphemy

Having uttered them—he did not pause to mark their effect; but straightened himself up, and left the room with a hurried unsteady step. On the threshold he met the servant coming to answer the bell; and well-nigh frightened the stolid domestic out of his propriety, as he brushed roughly past. The man could not have accounted to himself, at the time, for the curious feeling that impelled him to shrink aside out of Flemyng's way, as though there were danger in the touch of the other's garments. But, on the morrow—discoursing of these things amongst his fellows—

“I know what startled me, now;” he said, “I saw death in his face.”

Truly, it was so.

After much airy circling, the stately merciless falcon made her stoop at last; and the keen polished talons did their work, not negligently. The stricken quarry might flutter away for a while, and gain the shelter of a covert hard by; but the mortal wound under its dragged plumage would not suffer it long to pine.

CHAPTER XL.

BLOOD-MONEY.

WITH the same swift unsteady step, Vincent Flemyng went down the staircase, and out through the hall; where two or three liveried servants—standing, decorously, at attention as he passed—looked meaning comments at each other on the abrupt departure. In the open air he began to collect his wandering senses; but he had walked round three sides of the square, and had nearly returned to the point whence he started, before he realized in what direction he was going. Then he halted, and seemed to reflect; passing his hand over his brow, in a bewildered way, as if trying to recollect something. This he apparently succeeded in doing at last, for he turned abruptly on his heel, and walked rapidly eastwards, taking, as before, the least frequented ways.

A quarter of an hour or so brought him to his destination. The house he sought was situated in a dingy disreputable street, not far from Leicester Square. The ground-floor was occupied by a small chemist's shop; and on the smirched plate of the door adjoining was inscribed:

MR J. NISBET,

GENERAL PRACTITIONER.

Flemyng had evidently been here before; for he went straight into the shop; and, finding no one there, without further ceremony lifted a green curtain, and peered through the upper panes of a glazed door into a room beyond.

The only tenant of that room was a pale middle-aged man with long unkempt hair hanging over the collar of a rusty coat; at the first glance you would have set him down as one bankrupt in character not less than in purse; and you would have judged that his misfortunes were richly deserved. Mr Nisbet was smoking a short black pipe with a kind of vicious energy, and on a table close to his elbow, were a spirit decanter, glasses, and a jug of cold water. At the change of light, caused by the lifting of the curtain, he turned his head, with a sulky oath: he did not fancy being disturbed, for the sake of any business that was likely to come in *his* way. When he saw who the visitor was his brow cleared somewhat, and he rose quickly to meet him.

A very few words will sketch Joe Nisbet's history.

When his father (who was in the same profession) died, he came into a fair sum of ready money, and a fair practice in a small way. About this time he became acquainted with several of the artist-guild; these injudicious friends discovered—or professed to discover—in the unlucky Medico a decided talent for pen-and-ink caricatures. From that hour he never had a chance. He used to hang about the ateliers of a morning, spoiling quires of paper with his coarse sprawling outlines, and boring everybody for suggestions or appreciation, whilst his evenings were spent in uproarious revel with boon-companions of tougher constitutions than his own. Of course, the ready-money took to itself wings, and fled apace; and the little practice followed thereafter. He

never made enough by his etchings to pay for a week's drink. One or two of his old comrades, who had risen somewhat in the world, lent him a helping hand now and then, and several employed him professionally; for he was not without talent of a rough kill-or-cure sort; but these fees came in very irregularly, according to the means or the memory of the patient. So, day by day, the wolf howled nearer to Joe Nisbet's door, and it was not likely that the hungry brute would be barred out much longer.

He was brooding over these things, and seeking solace in his wonted anodyne, when Vincent found him on that fatal evening.

"This *is* a surprise—" Nisbet said, with a coarse attempt at cordiality. "What brings a swell like you to a den like this, just about your dinner hour? I'm glad to see you, any way. Sit down, old man. I've sent the boy on a message: he won't be back for ever so long. So there'll be no one to disturb us."

Poor Joe lied from the mere force of habit. The boy in question—distraught by the lack of custom and the utter hopelessness of drawing enough wages to keep him—had shaken the dust from his high-lows, outside that grimy threshold, months ago, for the last time.

Flemyng sat down, without speaking, on the chair the other set for him: for a minute or so the two men sat staring at one another, till Nisbet grew uncomfortably nervous.

"Why the — don't you say what you want with me," he asked, half angrily. "It's physic, I suppose. There's something devilish wrong with you. I never saw that drawn, *hunted* look on your face before. I don't like that dilation of the pupils. But if it's only late hours and that sort of thing that's playing the mischief with you, I can soon set you right. Let's feel your pulse.

But Flemyng thrust back the extended hand rudely, and spoke almost in a whisper; never relaxing that fixed feverish stare.

"Yes, you're right. There *is* something devilish wrong with me; and I am come for physic. You won't guess what that physic is, though. Listen, here."

In his turn he put forth his hand; and, drawing the other closer till their heads nearly touched, murmured a few words in his ear. Suddenly Nisbet wrenched himself roughly loose, and

and fell back in his chair with a sort of horror on his face.

"Are you—are you, mad?" he exclaimed. "Or what do you take me for?"

"I'm perfectly sane—" Vincent retorted. "And I take you for anything but the fool who would let such a chance slip. I know all about you, man. I know that you're nearer starving than I am: though all I can fairly call my own is—this."

He drew the roll of notes from his breast-pocket, and unfolded them deliberately on the table; amongst others was one for £100. On this especial note Nisbet's dull watery eyes were rivetted; till they lighted up with hungry gleam; it was very long since they had looked on such a sight, even in dreams. An hour ago he would have bartered his soul for half the price; now—it was only a question of life and death. No wonder that he began to hesitate.

"Is it—really—so bad as that?" he asked.

With a ghastly exultation the other watched the signs of yielding, and pressed his advantage. If true-hearted Tom Seyton could only have guessed to what uses his Crusader winnings would come!

"Worse than you can imagine. It just comes to this: if you won't help me, I'll hunt London over till I find some one who will. I believe there are a dozen who would serve my turn within a furlong of this house. And you know that as well as I do. I haven't patience for paltering. Say Yes or No; and have done with it."

He laid his hand on the notes as he spoke, and began to fold them up again, but the other interposed—just as Vincent expected he would.

"Don't—don't be so hasty"—he muttered. "You don't give a fellow time to pull himself together. Hold on a minute."

Then Nisbet filled a bumper with raw spirit, and finished it at a gulp; the deep fiery draught took instant effect even on that seasoned brain.

"Have it your own way"—he cried out, with a noisy recklessness. "D—n it all! I don't know why I should be so squeamish. A man has a right to do as he likes with his own. After all, it's only what I've been thinking of for myself these months past;

and what, I daresay, I shall do before the year's out. Hand over the stuff: you shall have what you want in three minutes."

With that he reeled across the room towards a press that stood in a corner. There he opened one drawer after another till he found what he sought, muttering and mumbling under his breath the while; and came back with a short square vial in his hand. This he set down on the table, clutching the notes as he did so.

"It's the right article—" Nisbet said, with a drunken chuckle. "I kept it for my own drinking."

Flemyng snatched up the vial far more eagerly than the other had grasped the money; and secured it in his breast. Then he prepared to depart, silently; neither did Nisbet seek to detain him. But as he went out through the door Vincent turned, and spoke again in a broken, quavering whisper.

"Will it—will it be much pain?"

The other answered, not in words, but only shook his averted head impatiently. And so those two most guilty men parted, without one word of farewell: and without once—after the price of blood was paid—meeting each other's eyes.

For a minute or two after Flemyng's departure, Joe Nisbet sat, gazing into the empty grate with a stupid sottish stare. Suddenly, one of those strange reactions, to which the basest of brutalized natures are sometimes liable, overcame and well-nigh sobered him. He sprang up, and dashed out through the surgery into the street bare-headed, with a vague purpose of calling Flemyng back, and wresting away the accursed vial by main force. But no such figure appeared within sight. As if anticipating some such change of purpose in his accomplice, Vincent immediately on leaving the door had plunged into one of the narrow by-lanes that abound in that neighbourhood; and even a detective would have had some trouble in tracking him. Ere long the open air began to make wild work with Nisbet's addled brain: as he staggered back into his dingy den, only a vague confused feeling of remorse possessed him; and this he proceeded to drown in more strong liquor, till he lay on the floor, a hideous crumpled heap.

It behoves the chronicler—wherever it is possible—to illus-

trate historical justice. Therefore, it is worth while to remark here, that the blood-money throve no better with Joe Nisbet than it had done with more illustrious sinners: it seemed as though it had only served to grease the wheels of the rickety chariot, which he drove down-hill, each day at more furious speed. He drank harder than ever; but now chiefly alone. The uproarious joviality, and childish vanity, that in old days used half to annoy, half to divert, his intimates, quite disappeared; he was always moody and morose now, when he was not noisily quarrelsome. He acquired a disagreeable habit, too, of perpetually glancing back over his own shoulder, which caused one of his companions to ask, irritably, "if he thought a sheriff's officer was standing behind his chair?"

To which Nisbet retorted—with a savage glare at the questioner—that "he was no more afraid of those cattle than any other man; and that before the other began to chaff, he'd better pay back that 'tenner' that had been owing these two years."

After this a general opinion began to prevail that Joe was in a very bad way indeed; and was likely to be of little more social use or ornament. For he had never yet been known to dun a 'pal' or a patient; and this outbreak of avarice was set down as a certain sign of incipient softening of the brain.

These presages were very quickly fulfilled: in the course of the ensuing winter Nisbet died, leaving just money enough to bury him. His last illness was mercifully brief; for he suffered not less in mind than in body; and raved terribly at times. The chief of his visionary torments seemed to be, that his nostrils were never free from the faint oppressive odour of *bitter almonds*.*

Flemyng would not trust his own feet to carry him homewards, and hailed the first hansom he met. As he drove along, his hand never stirred from his breast; grasping, as a man grasps his last earthly possession, that costly vial. The day was waning fast; but there was left a good hour of twilight, when he got out at the door of his lodgings, and let himself in with a pass-key.

Breathing hard and painfully, yet with a certain sense of relief

* This phase of delirium was narrated to me, many years ago, by a very clever surgeon; and he accounted for it only on the supposition of practised or intended murder.

and refuge—like a hunted buck that has just managed to struggle into cover—Vincent cast himself on the nearest couch ; and for a brief space, let his hot heavy eyelids droop over his aching eyes. Without that respite, he would scarce have been equal to the work he had yet to do.

CHAPTER XLI.

SCHRECKLICH DU BIST ALLEIN.

IN the career of some men—not of all—there is a certain hour, darker than any that have gone before, darker perchance than any that shall ensue ; when the battle of life seems to turn so terribly against us, that even a wise and valiant veteran may be sorely tempted to cast away his weapons in despair, if not to wield them against his own bosom, after the manner of a deed done on Mount Gilboa ages and ages ago.

But, my brother, should we fall into so sore a strait, we might find, I think, a better example than that of the earliest Anointed King. Rather let us call to mind another story of old time. It matters little, if it be an idle legend. Romance, no less than History, may surely teach us a lesson.

It was the decisive battle ; when all the strength of British heatheness was set in array against the Christian armies who came forth—nothing loth—from Camelot : the fight went on from early dawn to the going-down of the sun, when it was plain to all that the Red Cross must needs prevail. Then ensued a lull in the tempest, whilst the chiefest of the Round Table gathered round Pendragon for the last dreadful charge. Then too the five kings, who led the Paynim host, unhelmed themselves to quench their thirst, at the same spring. For many and many a year those five had drunk and warred together ; and now they knew that they never more would drain wine-cup or unsheath sword.

“Nathless—” quoth the chronicler—“when they saw it might not better be, they made scant moan or lamentation, and called upon their gods no more; but kissed, each the other, on the lips, and said farewell right kindly; then, being harnessed again, they set their backs against the wood, and, thereafter, gave ground no more than the pines.”

They were savage, stubborn misbelievers: yet the knightly saint, who alone was held worthy to look on the Holy Grail, could pray for no nobler ending.

It seems to me that the cares of no mortal is utterly desperate who shall hold fast to these watch-words—Courage and Charity.

But amongst Vincent Flem yng’s rare virtues, those two had never been numbered. So, now that the dark hour was upon him, he had to encounter it as best he might; for there were none to help or sustain.

The dusk was closing in fast, when he roused himself from that short stupor. As the power of connected thought returned, hazily, he began to recollect how, once at the Artist’s Club in Rome, they had discussed the question of self-murder; and how a Frenchman had confessed that always in the twilight (*le crépuscule de la Morgue* he called it) he was sensible of a morbid depression, and of a terrible temptation which, sooner or later, would surely overcome him. He recollected, too, how all had made sport of that sombre fancy; and how he himself had prayed the other, in case the presage should be fulfilled, to record on paper his last sensations, “for the benefit of science, and the instruction of subsequent suicides.” Since then, Alcide Desmarests had risen rapidly to eminence amongst landscape painters; whilst he, Vincent Flem yng—

How pleasant they were, though, those Roman days, when—foremost at least, if only one of many—he followed in Marion Charteris’ train. It was folly, of course, but harmless folly; better, a thousand times, than the feverish ague-fits of heat and cold that had tormented him for months past. Why not have left well alone? For it was his own rashness, in turning the screw too hard, that caused its threads to give way, so that all hold was lost. With a fresh sharp pang came back the memory

of Marion's bitter scornful glance when she rose up in revolt against his dictation, and defied him to do his worst. No doubt, from that very moment, she had begun to plot—all that had happened since. Then he cursed her aloud; not with the intense malignity which had marked his last words to Flora Dorrillon, but carelessly and contemptuously; as a hasty man might swear at the impediment that had caused him to stumble. What a blind idiot he must have been—not to have suspected concert between these two women. How they must have laughed at him. Would they laugh to-morrow—hearing what the night had brought about? Perhaps Marion Charteris would be a little penitent and sorry; as for the other—Once more, those awful blasphemies rose to his lips, and gurgled forth, like bubbles from a broken blood-vessel.

Darker and darker. Surely the night was closing in faster than usual. He would have lights instantly. There would be time enough for dreaming when his business was done.

The servant who answered the bell did not notice anything strange in his master's manner; but he remembered, afterwards, that when the lamp was brought in, Flemmyng moved quickly to the further side of the room, and began to pull out one volume after another from the book-case, keeping his face studiously averted. Also there was a thick indistinctness in his voice, as though it came through mufflings, when he told the other that "he should not dress for dinner, nor require him any more that night." He seemed nervously impatient too, whilst the man lingered to set one or two things in order; and at last, bade him begone, angrily. Directly Vincent was left alone, he unlocked the drawer which held the bank-notes, and began to arrange them in parcels; referring, as he did so, to a list scrawled down on a certain page in his betting-book.

It was a very large sum that lay before him there: so large, that many hopeful enterprising men would ask no more for the foundation of a fortune: with far less, adventurers have crossed the Atlantic or the Indian Sea; and returned, richer than Drake when he came to his moorings after a cruise on the Spanish Main.

To such men—especially had they been hampered by few

moral scruples—there would have been a very powerful temptation in those bundles of crisp fluttering paper; they would have been loth to abandon the certain enjoyments, and probable advantages to be extracted therefrom. Here was enough to make an entirely fresh start on, in a fresh track, where a bold outlaw's antecedents need not tell heavily against him, even if they were known. Why not let the creditors wait, as most of them could well afford to do? If fortune only smiled once more, every debt should be paid in full. After all—any moonlight flitting is better than a leap into the dark.

Thus, I repeat, would many men have discoursed with themselves; but so did not Vincent Flemyng. His conscience had become conveniently silent of late; and, as you will have remarked, his sense of honour was singularly dull; nevertheless, from such a temptation as has been just described he was wholly free.

Does this tell for or against him? It would be hard to say. Perhaps—putting, as was aforesaid, honesty entirely out of the question—the latter view of the case would be the truer one. In time of trial he had always lacked hope and enterprise: with both of these he had now done, for evermore. The slow poison that had circulated in his veins from the moment that he had yielded himself up, body and soul, to a guilty passion, wrought its work very thoroughly; the last fatal symptoms were evinced in that dull, dogged despair.

Certain it is, that from his one fixed idea the unhappy man never varied. He completed his task with perfect outward calmness and deliberation; wrapping each parcel of notes in a sheet of paper, on which were inscribed the amount of the debt, and the usual formula—"With Mr Flemyng's compliments."

In that very act of courtesy, there was a touch of the straining after stage-effect, which, from boyhood upwards, had been prominent amongst Vincent's most harmless frailties. Furthermore, it was noticed by several whose debts were cancelled then and there, that the envelopes were addressed in a peculiarly even and unwavering hand.

When all was finished, Flemyng cast himself back in his

chair with a weary groan; and closed his eyes once more. But at the same moment his finger clutched the vial that was still concealed in his breast; as though touch were needed to assure him of its safety. After a while his lips began to work and move; at last he muttered aloud—

“I ought—I will do it.”

With that he drew a fresh sheet of note-paper towards him, and began to write hurriedly; these were the words he wrote:—

“I write these lines, because I wish that you should know all the truth; and lest you, or my mother, or Kate should fancy that there has been any reason—but one—for this night’s work. I swear that my losses, which are paid to the uttermost farthing, have nothing to do with it. It is true that I am ruined: but I would have lived on, as a pensioner, even on you, rather than go—where I am going—if something had not happened since we parted. The threat in the letter in which I asked my mother for money, was a lie. I had never thought of dying—then. You will decide whether it will be better to keep what I tell you now from my mother and Kate; but you *must* believe me.

“You were right, ten thousand times over, in what you said about Flora Dorrillon. She, and none other, has brought me to *this*. I leave my blood upon her soul; and, if I thought any prayer of mine would avail, I would pray that it might rest there, till—we two meet again. I should like her to hear this, and hear it from you. Not that she will care. But it is my last wish, nevertheless: therefore I think you will fulfil it. You will take care of my mother, I know: it will not be easy work; but you have both sense and courage: and, for years past, you have been more of a son to her than I. You see, I do you justice, very late in the day; and I thank you for what you have done, and would have done, to help me. Your money did me right good service; though you never will guess how. I wish we had been better friends; that we were not so was my fault; like all the rest of it. I can see that much now. Farewell.

“V F.”

“You will see that the other letters go safely to their addresses—unopened? There is nothing but money in any of them.”

He wrote these lines, without check or pause; it seemed as though he were afraid to trust himself to reflect over much on their meaning: then he placed them in a sealed envelope, which he directed to Tom Seyton; with the superscription—"To be delivered immediately."

Having done this, he rose, and began to pace up and down, in the quick restless manner that denotes irritation, or tremor of nerves. After a score of turns or so, he stopped abruptly by the mantel-piece, and lighted one of the candles that stood thereon. With this in his hand, he passed through his bedroom and dressing-room, into the *atelier* beyond; which was built out in the rear of the house. It was a large lofty chamber lighted chiefly from above; and cheerful enough by day, but it was never intended for nightwork, and would have looked gloomy, even if illuminated by a dozen tapers instead of the solitary one that Flemyng carried. Against the walls hung or stood several sketches in water-colours, and one or two unfinished pictures in oils; each and every one, in whatever stage, bore the same stamp of crude negligence, added to an evident lack of power.

Vincent passed from one to the other of these; scanning each in turn with a deliberation that savoured of criticism; before he came to the last, his lip wore a smile—half scornful, half melancholy.

"What utter trash!"—he said aloud, with some bitterness. "And to think, that I chose this for a profession! If I had worked ten times harder, I should have spoiled ten times as much canvas—that's all."

Very, very late—too late to be of the faintest avail—self-knowledge and self-appreciation came. If the strange sad humility which now possessed Vincent Flemyng had visited him but a year ago, the manner both of his life and death would surely have been other from that which did befall.

But I do not wish to make him out a whit better than he really was. Even at that moment—realizing that his whole career had been a mistake, and more or less an imposture—he felt rather fain to blame fortune, or luck, or the injustice of others, than to impute the failure to his own deficiency both in

moral principle and intellectual power. Furthermore, his regrets were purely selfish. Over his own defeats he was ready enough to make moan: but he could share no regrets for the hopes he had disappointed, or for the affections he had misused and trampled on; no remorse for the blow that his crowning act of guilt would surely deal to those two loving women who had borne and forborne so long—to be repaid, in this wise, at the last; unless such a feeling were vaguely apparent in an unconquerable reluctance to write to either of them a single word of farewell.

On an easel, in the further corner of the *atelier*, a picture stood by itself: it was larger than any of the others; and covered with a crimson cloth. Vincent drew this roughly aside; and there was revealed a half-length portrait, of life-size. Whose portrait it was, the hastiest glance would tell you.

Very rarely in the beauty of living woman, are the imperial and the voluptuous so strangely mingled; more rarely still is found such subtle provocation, underlying soft treacherous languor, as gleamed from beneath the dark sweeping fringes of Flora Dorrillon's fatal eyes. The dress too, of deep blue velvet—the bodice cut square, after the old Venetian fashion—dissembled no perfection of her superb figure; and the effect, though fantastic, was infinitely becoming, of an Etruscan fillet, in gold and enamel of many colours, twined in and out amidst a fabulous luxuriance of braids and tresses.

Out of such a subject, it would have been difficult for any one, who could wield a brush even decently, to make a thoroughly common-place picture: coarse, or rigid, or unnatural as a bungler's efforts might have appeared, you would still have been aware that you were gazing on the semblance of a loveliness almost without peer. In this portrait, Flemyng had fairly outdone himself: there was none of the weak washy 'prettiness' which has been before mentioned, as disfiguring his best efforts; there was decided character about the whole performance, and marks of real artistic power. Something of the same influence, which urged Quentin Matsys on to renown, had surely been at work here; but as the passion differed, so also did the painter's endings.

Vincent stood before his handiwork (only a few finishing touches were needed to complete it now), gazing thereon long and searchingly. The scrutiny under that dim light seemed to tantalize him: he set the taper down, and lifting the canvas from the easel, carried it carefully into the sitting-room that he had lately quitted. The lamp was burning brightly there; but Flemyng lighted two more wax-candles, and placed them, so that their rays fell full on the face of the portrait, as it rested against a chair close to the head of a couch. On that same couch Vincent sat down, resting his elbows on his knees, and his chin on his clenched hands; and once more his eyes became fixed in an eager haggard gaze. His musings wandered hither and thither (for power of concentrated thought he had none); but—flutter where they would—like birds fastened to threads of uncertain length, they always reverted to the same point.

On that figure and face he never would look again.

Suddenly, he began to wonder where she was at that moment—what she was doing—whom she was talking to—how she was dressed? With a vast effort, he constrained himself to question his memory calmly, but he recollected that to-night there was a great banquet at a certain Ambassador's at which the Dorrillons would, surely, be present. Not less surely, *he* would be present too—that accursed Austrian; the very sight of whom had been sufficient of late to cast Vincent Flemyng into a jealous fit, not the less violent because it had been perforce suppressed.

The said Secretary had created no small sensation that season; he was quite fascinating enough in many ways to justify the evil reports of seductive success which had preceded him to England. With this reputation to keep up, he was bound to be cautious in his selection of a first victim. So, good-natured people said, he had hitherto abstained from pursuit of meaner game; intending to match himself against the Queen-Falcon of all, and to try 'conclusions of flight' with the Dorrillon. These whispers had reached Flemyng's ears, of course, and had made him more than uneasy, though he had never ventured to broach the subject to Flora; they came back again now, with a fearful substance and significance.

Probably, that serene handsome face was close to hers, at this very instant; and that trailing golden moustache—from under which the low soft voice could steal forth so winningly—closer yet to her ear. There was to be a ball afterwards, too, and the Austrian was one of the famous waltzers of Europe; Flora had more than once expressed her appreciation of his step and style. Would she fail to improve the opportunity of to-night? What a question! So, amidst light and music, there would be smiles, and whispers, and confidences, and concerting of plans for future amusement—if nothing more; and perchance, pressure of locked fingers, before all was done; whilst he, Vincent Flemyng, was left—alone—with his despair.

As the paroxysm over-mastered him more and more, he fairly gnashed his teeth; and sprang to his feet, glancing round for a weapon, as if she stood there in flesh and blood before him, and it were in his power to mar that fatal beauty. His eye lighted on a long Turkish dagger—one of the many toys he had brought from the East—which lay unsheathed on a table near: it usually did duty as a paper-cutter. In three seconds more, the canvas, that it had been a labour of love to cover with deftly-blended colours, hung, gashed and torn: the hands that were slow and faltering in creation, in annihilation were rapid and sure enough: no mortal eyes could have traced, in those unsightly shreds and patches, the late not unworthy semblance of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*.

But the sudden frenzy soon spent itself; and then Vincent stood staring blankly at the ruin before him with the shame-stricken regret of one who has madly destroyed or cast away his most precious earthly possession. As he cast himself down on the couch again, his lips began to move; and these words were just audible—

“It is full time I were gone.”

Once more, his fingers closed round the vial; but this time he drew it forth, and looked at it fixedly. One would have thought his face could grow no paler: yet while he so gazed, it *did* whiten till the very lips were bloodless; and he fell into a nervous tremor.

Let me speak the truth even to the miserable end. They

were not terrors of the Unseen World; nor the natural shrinking of a mortal on the threshold of immortality; nor a dread of merited wrath to come, that were assailing him then. Vincent Flemyng died—as he had lived for years past—a professed and consistent infidel. The aspen-shiver that shook him from head to foot as he lay came from simple physical fear: he flinched before Death as he would have quailed before the onset of a strong-armed man. He was himself sensible of this; for he sought encouragement in repeating aloud—

“It will be no pain. He said, it would be no pain.”

At last he rose, unsteadily; and taking a spirit-decanter from a closet hard by, drained three large glasses of brandy in succession. The first had no perceptible effect: with the second a feverish glow rose on his cheeks, and the tremor of his limbs ceased as though by magic; the third went straight to his brain.

If human ears had been within reach of that shrill mad laugh, help might possibly have come in time; but it only startled the night.

“I can do it—now.”

Even as the words passed his lips the poison was set thereto; and the work was done.

A long choking gasp—a slight noise of shivering glass—a dull smothered crash as Flemyng’s head struck the cushion of the couch heavily. Then—that awful intensity of silence which prevails only in a chamber where an unwatched corpse is lying.

The lamp grew dim and black; and the tapers flickered out; and the moon peered in for a while tarrying not long; and a misty grey dawn swiftly gave place to a brilliant summer-day. But, through all the changes of light, yonder clear waxen mask altered not in its serene beauty; so serene—that it was hard to believe its wearer had ever known sin, or shame, or sorrow.

CHAPTER XLII.

BLOOD-RECKONING.

THE woman whose duty it was, each morning, to set those chambers in order, was the first to discover the deed that had been done. She gave the alarm, of course, after the fashion of her kind, with loud wailing and outcry. Flemyng's servant (who did not lodge under the same roof) was on the spot before the confusion had subsided. The man had sense and coolness enough to see in what direction his own duty lay. Without waiting the arrival of the doctor, who was summoned purely as a matter of form, he went straight to Seyton, with the letter addressed to the latter in his hand.

Tom was not particularly matinal in his habits, when in town ; he was sleeping soundly when the messenger of evil tidings broke unceremoniously into his room. It is at all times very hard to realise the death of one whom we left in full health and strength but a few hours ago ; it is especially hard, when the news comes to us at our waking. The shock was not only more severe, but so utterly different from any that Seyton had ever experienced, that for a while he was thoroughly bewildered ; and sat staring stupidly at the address of the letter, without breaking the seal. At last he recovered himself sufficiently to answer the servant's repeated enquiry as to " what was to be done ? "

" Wait outside for a few minutes—" Tom said. " I'll be able to tell you better, when I've read this. I must read it alone."

And he did read the letter—word by word, syllable by syllable—twice or thrice over : when he folded it up mechanically, he could have repeated every line by heart. His self-possession had quite come back by this time ; and, whilst he dressed hastily, he questioned the servant as to the little the latter had to tell, and gave concise directions as to what was immediately to be done. Within half-an-hour he was at Flemyng's lodgings. The doctor, whom Seyton found there, had also very little to say. Life had evidently been extinct for some hours before he was called in ;

and it was evident that instantaneous death had been caused by an unusually powerful dose of prussic acid.

"I'm very much afraid one of my own profession might be brought in as accomplice before the fact—" the doctor said. "There were a few drops left in the broken bottle; and it must have been of a peculiar shape, too. I feel certain that poison was never obtained from an ordinary chemist: they dare not sell it to any man who could not show a diploma. But, it would be next to impossible to trace it. And, I suppose, in these sad cases least said is soonest mended. You have no evidence of the deceased's state of mind, I presume."

This last question Seyton did not think it necessary to answer. He simply remarked, "that it could make little difference where the poison was obtained; and that he was most anxious to avoid publicity, so far as it could conscientiously be done. If the doctor would tell him what formalities were necessary, they should be complied with at once."

Then the two went in together into the room where the body lay—on the same couch, and almost in the same posture as it had been found, only a white kerchief was cast over the face. Seyton drew this gently away, and gazed down steadfastly on the delicate features—now more than ever refined in their unearthly beauty. The fair white brow was smooth, as if it never had frowned; no trace of evil tempers lingered round the chiselled lips, on which the faint death-smile had just begun to dawn; and the dark restless eyes were veiled, for ever, under the lids that seemed to have settled down, so wearily. It was a picture that even a stranger could hardly have looked upon unmoved. The doctor, albeit unromantic by nature, and case-hardened by rough professional work, was surprised into a pitiful sigh.

"He must have been a very handsome man—" he said, softly.

The words were not especially sympathetic; but they were so evidently meant in kindness, that Seyton turned towards the speaker, with more gratitude than if the other had attempted a set speech of condolence, as he answered in a broken voice.

"He *was* very handsome. And so like his mother: I never knew *how* like, till now. Only think, what this will be to her! She has no child left, except my wife. They both almost idolized

him. We were never such good friends as we ought to have been—he and I. He says it was his fault—poor fellow! I believe, it was rather mine. I'm too rough and clumsy to deal with anything—or anybody—that needs delicate handling. Even now, I came up to town to help him—indeed I did; yet, I fear, I only made matters worse. I think bungling does as much harm as malice in this world; if not more."

It was like Tom Seyton's indiscretion—making family confidences to an utter stranger, from whom he had no right to expect a shadow of sympathy. But the doctor was not inclined to quarrel with that simple expansiveness, or even to deride it; neither—saving your worship's critical presence—am I.

After seeing to some necessary business (such as looking over papers and the like), and forwarding the different letters to their addresses, Seyton went out; saying that he should not be gone more than an hour.

He walked straight and swiftly towards Plantagenet Square; yet it was past noon when he got to the Lady Dorrillon's door; and her groom was already in waiting, with her saddle-horse. A call at such an hour would have been a social anomaly, even had the visitor been on the 'familiar' visiting-list; but the staid servant who took Seyton's card, merely said that "he would inquire if her ladyship was at home." It appearing that such was the case, Tom was conducted at once into the smallest of several reception-rooms on the first-floor. Almost immediately Lady Dorrillon joined him there; fully equipped in her riding-gear. There was both surprise and expectation on her face; but her smile was very gracious, and she held out her hand cordially: for she had rather liked what she had seen of her visitor during his brief sojourn at Charteris Royal. That same surprise was disagreeably increased, when she saw her courtesy wholly unnoticed, if not actually repelled: so her first address was, perforce, cold and constrained.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Mr Seyton—only from the earliness of the hour, of course. Is there anything I can do for you? Or have you any message for me?"

Some suspicion of the truth, though not of the whole truth, shot across her mind just then. She guessed that Seyton had

come to speak to her concerning Vincent Flemyng, before he placed the letter that you wot of in her hand—speaking never a word.

She read it through, almost as carefully as Tom himself had done : though her countenance neither fell, nor changed perceptibly, it was nearly colourless when she came to the end. As she read one especial sentence (you may easily imagine which one), she could not repress a shudder ; it seemed so like the ratifying of the curse that was hissed into her ears a brief while ago.

“In Heaven’s name, what has happened ? ” she asked.

“Heaven has little to do with this matter, except it be to punish,” Seyton answered. “Nothing has happened that *you* need feign surprise at, if the words written down there are true. And dying men do not often lie. I believe that within an hour after those lines were penned Vincent Flemyng had gone to his account, with the guilt of self-murder added to his other sins.”

It was scarcely remorse which overcame Flora Dorrillon just then ; but rather the natural horror which causes us to shrink from the contact of any funereal sign or emblem ; added to those same pitiful instincts of womanhood, which, as you know, were not wholly crushed within her. In the course of her career she had incurred, once, if not oftener, the stain of blood-guiltiness in the second or third degree ; but now, for the first time, she was brought abruptly face to face with death—death, plainly imputed to her. She covered her eyes with her hand, and Seyton could barely hear the words——

“It is *too* terrible. I never guessed—Indeed, I am innocent of this, as you can be.”

“So the Law would say, doubtless ”—the other retorted—“at least, the Law as written by man. Even I do not accuse you of having instigated the crime ; or of having furnished the poison. It is also possible that yonder suicide never warned you of his intention when last you met. Yet, none the less do I believe that God will hold you accountable for the deed done last night ; and that you will have to answer it, sooner or later.”

The sudden horror that had quelled Flora Dorrillon for an instant had passed away now, and her haughty spirit asserted

itself once again. She lifted her head with the imperial disdain that her enemies knew so well: it was evident she would brook little more of that rough plain-speaking.

"I am too shocked by this intelligence," she said, quietly; "not to make great allowances for your excitement. But I cannot allow you to go on in that tone. You are under some extraordinary delusion. I repeat, distinctly, that I have no more to do with this miserable catastrophe than yourself. If you will listen patiently, I think you will be forced to do me so much justice. Soon after we met at Charteris Royal, I saw that I had made a strong impression on poor Vincent Flemyng: indeed, he avowed this to me. I did not check or repel him, I own, as of course I ought to have done. Why I did not do so, signifies little now. Perhaps I wanted amusement; or I fancied—"

Seyton could contain himself no longer: he had over-stepped the bounds of ceremonious courtesy at the very beginning of the interview; and grief and indignation waxed hotter within him, as the contrast smote him between the superb beauty, full of luxuriant life, and the set bloodless face he had looked upon so lately.

"Amusement—and fancy—" he broke in. "Is it possible that you can use such words; knowing that your indulgence of a whim has destroyed a man, body and soul; and brought shame and misery on two women who never injured you or any living creature?"

Now, as you are aware, it would have been easy for Flora to justify herself, partially, here. She could have shown that she had acted, at least, with a purpose, and that deception on one side had only foiled deliberately base intentions on the other. That she forbore to vindicate herself by further damaging the memory of the dead is scarcely to be imputed either to tenderness or remorse. She had plenty of that pseudo-generosity which can be liberal out of what costs the giver nothing. The same feeling which had prompted her to help Flemyng in his difficulties, with a loan which she never meant should be repaid, kept her silent now. When every possible fantasy was provided for, money was to her no more than glittering sea-sand; and about the good opinion of the world in general she had learnt to be scornfully

indifferent. So that in neither case was there involved a very precious sacrifice.

She accepted the rough interruption with admirable temper.

"It will be better that you should hear me out patiently. I did encourage your unhappy brother-in-law, at first, to a certain degree. But even then he had no right to expect that he could ever be more to me than a familiar friend. When I saw that this would not satisfy him, and that each day made him more unreasonable and exacting, I really tried to make him understand the utter hopelessness of his pursuit. I am guilty of coquetry of course, but I do not think you ought to use a harder word. Could I dream that his folly—and mine, if you will—would end so terribly? Before he came here yesterday, something had nearly maddened him. I thought it might have been ill-luck at play; but he denied this. I cannot tell you all he said; I do not wish to remember; but he used words for which I would never forgive any living man. This much I will tell you. He required of me, for his sake, to forget my marriage-vow, and to sacrifice my honour. Answer me this one question frankly. If I had known that only by so doing I could prevent the other crime he meditated, would you have counselled me to yield?"

A subtler logician than the sturdy Marlishire-man might have been puzzled by that dilemma. With an inward groan of helpless perplexity, Tom owned himself utterly baffled.

"I'm a poor hand at casuistry"—he said, bluntly. "And, I thank heaven, coquetry is so strange to me and mine, that I know nothing of its laws, nor of how far people may go without breaking them. You have the best of the argument, on the face of it. But—if leading one of God's creatures into a maze, from which self-murder is the only outlet, be not a mortal sin—my notions of right and wrong are arbitrary. Look here, Lady Dorrillon: it's easy enough to entangle an advocate of my calibre with your special-pleading. You might find it harder work with others—aye, even with your own husband."

A slow, quiet voice spoke close behind them.

"That we shall see, presently. What you have further to say, Mr Seyton, had better be addressed directly to me."

Turning in surprise and amazement, Tom found himself face to face with Sir Marmaduke Dorrillon. With his spare erect figure and rigid features, framed in the dark-curtained doorway, the new-comer looked like some grim master-piece of Holbein.

CHAPTER XLIII.

ICH DIEN.

I THINK, if the truth were known, it would be found that John of Bohemia came to his end from an arrow shot at a venture, or a chance blow. Surely none of the stout English hearts who 'bare up the fray' at Créci would wittingly have harmed the brave blind old man, when he rode into the thickest of the lost battle to deal one more darkling sword-stroke.

So, in wordy warfare, certain veterans command forbearance, if not respect, from their adversaries. Under any ordinary circumstances of controversy, Seyton would have welcomed the advent of a masculine opponent not less sincerely than that of a fresh ally. Now, he felt rather embarrassed than relieved; for very pity, he would have avoided this second encounter, had it been possible; but it was too late.

As Sir Marmaduke came forward, a close observer might have noticed an unusual stiffness and tardiness in his movements; the measured deliberation with which each step was planted could not conceal a tottering uncertainty of gait. Sitting down in an arm-chair close to his wife's side, the Baronet spoke again.

"I do not apologize for intruding, nor for having listened to the latter part of this conversation; because I think that no one has a better right than myself to be here. From words that I overheard—strange words to be used in such a presence—I infer

that some terrible calamity has happened. I wish to be informed of its nature at once."

Seyton hesitated, as if loth to answer. But Lady Dorrillon had no such scruples. Her tone was perfectly calm and assured; though sad and hushed, as befitted the occasion.

"It is a very terrible calamity. Vincent Flemyng committed suicide last night, by poison. Before he died, he wrote this letter. There is only one passage in it which concerns you or me."

On that passage she laid her finger, as she passed the open letter over to her husband.

Sir Marmaduke bent his head as he took it, with the formal politeness that was part of his nature; and which was displayed no less towards his nearest and dearest than towards the rest of womankind. Very deliberately, too, he unfolded a massive gold eye-glass, and began to peruse the lines indicated. It appeared that, even with this aid, his sight was strangely him; for a long epistle might have been studied, in the time that it took him to grasp the meaning of those few simple words. As he pored over them, a faint flush began to rise on his high pale forehead: much like that produced by the pressure of a hard heavy cap; only it was marked on the lower part of the brow.

"A fearful catastrophe, indeed," he said at last, with an evident effort, after clearing his throat several times, huskily. "None can regret it more sincerely than myself; nor sympathize more sincerely with your affliction, Mr Seyton. But, I must ask—is it on this evidence alone, that you have ventured to impute to Lady Dorrillon any responsibility in this matter?"

Tom was compelled to come to the front now: he did so, sturdily, if reluctantly.

"That is the only evidence. But, surely, it is conclusive. Vincent Flemyng had many faults and failings: but—that he was capable of penning a groundless calumny within a few moments of plunging into Eternity—I cannot believe. Can you?"

He looked the other keenly in the face, as he put the point-blank question. Sir Marmaduke flinched not a whit.

"Mr Seyton, should there be any inquiry into your relative's death, I presume the verdict that you would strive to ensure

would be—Temporary Insanity. In such a verdict I feel able conscientiously to concur. Were it otherwise—I should not scruple, now, to affirm that yonder unhappy man, before he went to his account, added to his other misdeeds a cruel and malicious falsehood.”

Seyton was nearly provoked into a hasty answer, but he had sense enough to refrain; moreover, he saw that words would be wasted on such hopeless obstinacy as this.

“Am I to understand then”—he began.

Sir Marmaduke rose to his feet; leaning heavily on the back of his wife’s chair, as if he needed some support. When he had drawn himself up to his full height, the tremor in his limbs ceased altogether, and his tall frame was rigid as steel. But that strange flush on his forehead was mounting and darkening. He stretched forth his hand—as it were, in warning or deprecation—whilst he spoke, with a grave courtesy, not devoid of dignity, in spite of its old-fashioned and somewhat overstrained formality

“Pardon me for interrupting you, Mr Seyton,” he said in a cold measured voice. “My only reason for so doing, is my wish that no needless rancour should subsist between us; even if we must be strangers from this hour. I do not wish to hear another word from you, on this subject, lest it should be such as I could not forgive. And, I pray you to believe, that I would not with any word of mine, knowingly, hurt or offend you. But thus much it is my duty to say. You asked, I think—‘how Lady Dorrlon would justify herself, in presence of her husband?’ Is not that question answered already? If you have any further doubts, I will tell you more. I will tell you that Mr Flemyng’s assiduities were not unnoticed by me—that I have been for some time aware of his increasing infatuation. If this knowledge did not trouble me then—as I affirm, on my honour, it did not—I am scarce likely to suspect my wife’s honour now. I leave it in her own guardianship—confidently, as I have ever done. And I utterly decline to hold her accountable for the desperation of guilty passion; whether that desperation be shown in life or death. Mr Seyton, your character for probity and honour stands so high, that I am bound to hold you incapable of deliberate injustice.

I must believe that in this matter you have followed your notions of right. But I take leave to tell you that, in speaking of Lady Dorrillon, as you appear to have done, you have gravely and grossly erred: in speaking to her—even as I heard you speak—you have cruelly abused your privileges as an ambassador. For in such a capacity you appear to have come hither. Sir, I return you your credentials.” (He held out the letter with a steady hand.) “And now, so far as I am concerned—this interview is ended; unless you wish to crave Lady Dorrillon’s pardon for words uttered in rash excitement. In that case, I shall be happy to intercede for you. If you cannot—or will not—do this, I will pray you to depart, in silence.”

There was over-much of set oratory in all this; added to a certain pomposity of manner. But Seyton was no more inclined to laugh than to be angry. During the last few minutes his fierce indignation had been tempered by a great pity; the subdued tone showed this.

“I cannot ask any one’s pardon for having done what I believed to be my duty. But I will trouble you with my presence no more. I have stayed here too long already; for I have bitter work to do before I sleep. Sir Marmaduke, I can bear you no malice for having spoken according to your light. And, Lady Dorrillon—only one more word. I read your name amongst the patronesses of the great Charity Ball that is to come off to-night. Whilst you are dressing for it, will you remember that about that same hour I shall have to tell Vincent Flemyng’s mother that her son is lying stiff and cold—murdered by his own hand?”

Without further ceremony Seyton turned on his heel, and left the room forthwith.

From the moment that her husband began to speak Flora’s eyes had been bent studiously on the ground; it seemed as though she were determined not to influence him, even by a glance. But when Seyton addressed her thus directly she looked up, and let her deep earnest gaze rest on his face, till he turned away to depart. In those glorious hazel eyes there dwelt a half-reproachful sadness, such as you might expect to find in those of a meek blameless woman, who—having been cruelly misjudged

and misconstrued—is content that Time, the revenger of all things, should avenge her. Was this all acting?

O fair and patient reader! You may answer that riddle according to your own sweet fancy.

Sir Marmaduke Dorrillon stood erect upon his feet—never varying a whit that strange rigidity of feature and limb—till Seyton was fairly gone. But, a second or two after the door had closed, that nervous tremor began to possess him again; and suddenly, as if some string had snapped within him, he dropped back into his chair, with a deep hollow groan; pressing both his palms against his brow, whereon that ominous flush still waxed deeper and broader.

To Flora's question—"if he felt ill"—he replied with only an impatient shake of the head. There was silence for a minute or two; then Sir Marmaduke spoke—with a ghastly imitation of his habitual chuckle of self-satisfaction.

"Wasn't that farce well played out, my lady? Why don't you applaud now it's over? None of the stage old-men could have done it better. 'I can leave my wife's honour in her own guardianship.'—That was neatly put, I think. If I had had longer notice, I might have made more of that point, though. But—but I was rather taken by surprise."

His tone, all in an instant, lost its bitter irony; and broke down quaveringly

"O my God—my God—that I should have sunk to this—to lie, like a hound, to a brave and honest gentleman, such as he who has just gone out."

His faded blue eyes, that had been dry for many a year, were wet with the big blistering tears of agony and shame.

I think, in all this sad and simple world, there is no sadder spectacle than an old man weeping.

Lady Dorrillon was both shocked and surprised; and more moved than she cared to show. She had never spoken to her husband so gently as she did now.

"I fear this scene has been too much for you, or you would not talk in that strain. You took my part very generously; and I thank you heartily for so doing. I should be sorry, if you cancelled that kindness. You only spoke the simple truth. I can

take right good care of my honour, and yours. If you knew all you would know that you never had less to fear than from that wretched madman, whom I cannot regret even as a friend."

The soothing influence of manner and tone that, at any other time, would have acted like a charm, were utterly powerless, here. He went on—panting and stammering with passion.

"I *do* know all. At least, I know that he fared no better than the other fools whom you torture for your sport. He had less patience, or more courage, than the rest of us; that's all. Will that prevent his name, and yours, and mine, being bandied about from one scandal-monger to another, for months to come? A pleasant drama they will make of the story that was finished last night. I shouldn't wonder if Halloran wrote a ballad on it. It is time all this should end; it *shall* end, too. I'll go somewhere—anywhere to hide myself. And you shall follow, my lady; whether you will or no. Wittol as I am—I've that much of authority left. And I'll use it: I will by—."

It was the first oath Sir Marmaduke had ever uttered in his wife's presence.

On all former occasions Flora had quelled her husband's feeble attempts at rebellion very quickly and imperiously. But now, she maintained the half-contemptuous forbearance which makes us indulgent to the petulance of fractious childhood.

"You must have taken leave of your senses"—she said. "There is no question of shame. Why should the world be more uncharitable than usual? Nothing is so easily accounted for as the desperation of gamblers. You confess that I have been faithful—in deed if not in word. What would you have more?"

"Faithful? Faithful to whom?" he retorted, in the same fierce broken tones. "Faithful—not to me, but to a dead man's memory. Did you think your secret was safe from me? I'm not so blind and deaf as I seem. Did you ever guess how I have hated that man, and envied him, too? I hated him, because he was beyond my reach; if he had been above ground, I would have had his blood, or he should have put me out of pain. I envied him his quiet rest; and—more than all—your visits to his grave. And you dare—"

Flora Dorrillon's bearing changed startlingly, as though she

had been touched by some evil enchanter's wand ; not a trace of gentleness, or compassion, lingered on her face ; and in her eyes glittered the keen cold cruel look of battle. Such a look, some now living might remember to have seen in her father's eyes, as he took up ground for one of his mortal duels.

"Stop:" she said in a very low voice. "Stop—if you are wise. You have said words already that I will never forget. I think you are about to say some that I will never forgive. Rather than have uttered the name that is on your tongue, you will wish, one day, you had bitten it through."

But the warning, or menace (for it savoured as much of the one as of the other), seemed to give the last spur-stroke to Sir Marmaduke's frenzy

"Not utter that name?" he shrieked out. "And why should I be more discreet than you have been? Have I not heard you murmur it often enough in your sleep; with the smile of an adulteress on your lips? Not utter it? If these were the last words I should ever speak—I would call down God's curse on Guy Livingstone's memory, and on the hour when first you met."

Flora started slightly when that name was pronounced; but betrayed no other sign of emotion, much less of anger. Any passionate outbreak would have been better than the bitter calmness with which she made reply.

"You would not be warned. Now, take the consequences. When I consented to become your wife, did I lead you to expect either love or honour from me? You know right well it was not so. The falsehood I spoke at the altar I take on my own soul; to you I told none. You asked me no questions as to my past life; if you had done so I should have answered them, frankly, *then*. Now all is different. But you take credit to yourself for having surprised my secret; and, you think, I was careful to guard it; and should never have betrayed myself, except in dreams? You shall not have to complain of my reserve in future. You have taunted me with keeping faithful to a memory? I would have forgiven you even this, if you had not uttered *his* name, and coupled it with a curse. Did I love Guy Livingstone? I loved him well enough to have felt more pride in being called his mistress than ever I have felt in being called your wife; well

enough—to have crouched at his feet, and endured all scorn and cruelty, if I might have hoped for one caress, when he grew weary of tyranny; well enough to have blessed him for coming back to me for one day, though others had held him all the rest of the year. He kissed me once—so long ago! You know that your lips have never touched mine. But you did not know that no living man has fared better than you; and never will, I think, till I die. And you have dared to curse this man in my presence. Sir Marmaduke Dorrillon, ours was always a very simple marriage-contract. It shall be simpler still, from this hour. I am not thinking of open separation. I will do my duty as the mistress of your house as I have hitherto done: and I will visit other people's in your company, when I feel inclined to do so. But in all other respects, our lives henceforward shall be as much apart as if I had never borne your name. Before I married you, you promised—'I should have my own way in all things:' it is too late to think of forcing my free-will now. You will keep up amicable appearances, or make the world a witness of our quarrels, according to your own good pleasure. You say, 'you will take me away, whether I will or no.' You can easily test your authority. I absolutely refuse to leave London, till it suits my convenience."

Her manner was quite composed, and there was no break in the rapid, even flow of her speech; but ever and anon, the shiver of suppressed passion ran through her frame, a not all of angry passion. The same expression that transfigured Flora's face, whilst she gazed on a certain portrait, dwelt on it now, whilst she gloried in the avowal of her sinful love.

Lady Dorrillon had been too much wrapped up in her own thoughts to notice the effect of her words; otherwise she would surely have paused—in fear, if not in pity.

For a few seconds after his wife began to speak Sir Marmaduke continued to glare at her, in savage impotent fury; but ere long a vague bewildered expression possessed his eyes, which grew strangely heavy and dim. As the last words were spoken, he staggered up to his feet, with a groan plainly indicative of physical agony; and stood erect for an instant, pressing his hand convulsively on his brow once more. With a swift upward surge, the dark red flush mounted even to the roots of the thin grey

hair ; it vanished almost as quickly ; and then a tinge of ashen-grey overspread the wan withered face, over which soon swept a yet more awful change. As Sir Marmaduke collapsed on his chair, with a dull helpless crash, after one terrible struggle for speech, a child might have read in his distorted features the ghastly sign-manual of Paralysis.

In front of any other calamity, Flora, in the midst of remorse or relenting, would have kept her self-possession. But Death, swift and sudden, would have impressed her far less than this grewsome Death-in-Life. Little as she recked of the simplest precepts of Christianity—so far as following them out in practice went—she was, yet, not an infidel. It seemed to her that the hand of an angered Providence was actually manifested here ; and, with that conviction, came the vague terror of the Unseen, which has caused many sceptics and scoffers to grovel in the dust, since the day when a voice from Heaven spake to certain persecutors journeying towards Damascus.

As she rushed to the door, her shrieks rang out shrill and wild. Help was near, and came speedily. But, before it came, the last remnant of Flora's hardihood had departed. They found her kneeling, with her face buried in her hands ; as though she would shut out the sight and sound of the ruin that was chiefly—if not wholly—her work.

CHAPTER XLIV

LAST STROKES OF THE SHUTTLE.

THE Row was busy and beautiful, as it is wont to be, one hour after noon, when the season is at high tide. There was the same charming contrast between the many-hued fringe of summer raiment without the rails, and the moving mass of sombre colour within—the same murmuring music of pleasant

voices in the air, broken by distincter notes of laughter-trills—that we have seen and heard so often; and the soft June sky over all.

Many bright troops of amazons marched past, in slow or quick time, that morning; and few came out of the review with greater credit than that especial one, in which Marion Charteris was the most notable figure. She seemed in radiant spirits, and was looking wonderfully well; the weather, and all other accessories of time and place, were just calculated to set off her peculiar beauty. The eyes of many who knew not her name, followed her as she rode slowly along—halting often, to exchange a nod, a word, or a smile; whilst on the ponderous braids displayed beneath her hat (they *were* her own—for the *chignon*-hypocrisy was not then organized) the sunlight gleamed, as on a globe of burnished copper. Many too could not refrain from envying that favoured cavalier who—however others might come and go—never resigned his post at the Fiametta's bridle-rein. Neither did Denzil Ranksborough seem insensible to the advantages of his position; his manner was, at times, almost animated, and there was apparently no lack of subjects mutually interesting; for their subdued converse never languished for an instant.

The squad, in the van of which these two rode, had nearly reached the eastern extremity of the Row, and were preparing to wheel; when they came abreast of a knot of some half-dozen men, who had come to a halt under one of the trees, and were talking eagerly and earnestly together. From these Bertie Grenville detached himself, and joined Mrs Charteris' party.

His countenance was unusually grave and gloomy; before he opened his mouth, it was clear he was laden with evil tidings.

"Have you heard what has happened? Of course, you haven't though. I can guess that, by your faces. Vincent Flemyng committed suicide last night, by poison."

Most of those within hearing were more or less shocked or astounded; from one or two there broke a startled exclamation. Marion Charteris uttered not a word; but Ranksborough saw her cheeks grow deadly pale, whilst she swayed to-and-fro in her saddle as if suddenly dizzied.

"It's a fearful business"—Bertie went on—"even as it stands. And I think we don't know the worst of it yet. I won nearly three hundred of poor Flemyn'g last week. I didn't much expect to get it; for he has been losing awfully of late; and I didn't mean to dun him—that's one comfort. But, before I was up this morning, a note was left at my lodgings, with the full amount in bank-notes, and his 'compliments' written on the envelope: several other fellows to whom he owed money, got the counterpart of my packet. The next thing I heard was, the news I've just told you. I fancy it will turn out that something else besides his losses drove him to this; unless he was out of his head altogether. Isn't it horrible?"

No one answered: and Ranksborough first broke silence.

"I don't wonder at your being overcome, Mrs Charteris. You knew him when you were both children, if I remember right. It is shocking enough to hear such news of a mere acquaintance—much more of an old friend."

The considerate intentions of the speaker quite deserved the grateful look which repaid him.

"Yes, a very old friend"—Marion murmured faintly. "His poor mother and sister, too! It is too dreadful to realize. I wish—I wish some one would take me home. Where is Mr Bellingham?"

The individual in question was a sober elderly cousin, who generally chaperoned Mrs Charteris in the absence of her husband. He rode forward as soon as his name was mentioned; and—without another word being spoken—the two departed together. The same moment the group began to break up—to discuss elsewhere the tidings they had just heard—till Grenville and Ranksborough were left alone.

"It has hit her harder than I thought it would"—the former remarked, with a significant glance after Mrs Charteris' retreating figure. "I fancied all *that* was over, long and long ago."

The other's brow contracted; but in meditation, it seemed, rather than in anger.

"So it *was* all over, I believe—" he said very quietly. "At

least, if you mean anything beyond the interest any woman may feel in an old playmate. But you're pretty right, Cherub, in what you're thinking about. There's something more in this affair than either you or I know of, or ever shall know, perhaps."

"Do you remember—" Bertie asked after a minute's silence — "do you remember our talk in the smoking-room, the first night we met poor Flemyng, when he seemed so struck with the Dorrillon; and when Mrs Charteris seemed rather pleased than otherwise at the turn things were taking. 'I shouldn't wonder if they were both in the same stable—' Hardress said. Cis Castlemaine and I came nearly to the same conclusion afterwards. Now I'd lay long odds—if it wasn't a shame to bet about such matters—that we should find traces of the Dorrillon's *griffe* in this business, if we could sift it to the bottom. If that is the case, it's only natural that the other should feel rather remorseful; though, of course, neither of them contemplated such a catastrophe. I'm sure *I* didn't when I talked about 'dropping troublesome people down *oubliettes*.'"

"We shall know more about it some day—" the other remarked, indifferently; as if he did not care to pursue the subject. "It's the merest guess-work, at present."

But, as Ranksborough rode homewards alone, he pondered on these things, far more gravely than was his wont.

"I really do care to hear all that story, now—" he thought within himself. "There must have been some strong sensational bits before the last act began. I must get the Fiametta to confess *her* share in it, at least."

But, though their Platonic amusements went on prospering long afterwards, and though a familiar intimacy subsists at this very hour, Denzil Ranksborough never has listened to that story; and—I dare swear—never will.

What is yet more remarkable, though Marion and Flora are still fast friends, and are oftener than ever alone together, one name, since that day, has never passed the lips of either—the name of Vincent Flemyng. It may well be that the first shrinks from full knowledge of the truth, lest she should discover herself to have been the unwitting second-cause of deadly harm;

and the last disdains to share her burden with another, even though it be the burden of blood-guiltiness.

Before the buzz of wonderment and speculation, caused by the mysterious suicide, had half exhausted itself, fresh game for the scandal-hunters was started. In the course of that same afternoon, it was noised abroad that Sir Marmaduke Dorrillon had been stricken down with mortal sickness, and that there were small hopes of his recovery. Much more general compassion was excited by this second calamity than had been accorded to the other. Vincent Flemyng had very few personal friends, or even intimate acquaintances; whilst Dorrillon was not only liked by the elders of his own standing, but, to a certain extent, admired by many who looked upon him as a rare specimen of the *Vieille Roche*. Those who had been most severe on his connubial mistake, repented themselves of their witticisms now; and recognized the blank that would be created, if the kind courtly old man were to appear in the midst of them no more.

Nevertheless, Sir Marmaduke's presages, as to the *cancans* that would ensue, were only too fully realized. No woman in broad England could count more enemies than Flora Dorrillon. The ranks of these had gone on swelling ever since her bright baleful star first sparkled in the social firmament; and she had never cared to conciliate a foe, or make compensation for the damages she caused, even by an implied regret. On the foundation of the double catastrophe it was easy to build up a formidable tower of circumstantial evidence. The matrons and mature maidens who had been injured, more or less directly, by Flora's fatal fascinations or merciless tongue, broke out into vicious jubilation; exulting—after the manner of Elizabeth when proof, or pretext, sufficient against the prisoner at Fotheringay was found, and the sour-visaged Virgin knew that a fairer, if not wiser, head than her own would soon roll on the scaffold. And each cried to her fellow—

“Awake. Arise. Set on and spare not. Lo, our enemy is delivered into our hand.”

It is not worth while to enumerate the wild conflicting rumours that got abroad, to you, who have heard already the

right version of the tale. Bad as things were—the scandal would have spread far more widely, and endured far longer, if it had not been for Castlemaine, and others; men of mark and influence whom it were not safe to offend. These struck in boldly, to the rescue of their ancient comrade's name—even as Nestor bestrode his fallen brother-in-arms—and held the busy-bodies at bay, partly by ridicule, partly by fear.

But the voices neither of friend nor foe passed the threshold of the quiet darkened chamber, where Flora Dorrillon kept sleepless watch whilst her husband lingered on the dim Debateable Ground that divides the frontiers of life and death. The later pictures of this series have, perforce, been somewhat gloomy and unattractive; so there is the less reason for loading more canvas with sombre colours. On this principle I will leave you to imagine the scene at Warleigh, when Seyton had told his terrible news. Mrs Flemyng was too much stunned for awhile, to realize what had befallen her: nor has she ever fully recovered from the shock, though she has subsided long since into a quiet enduring grief, which knows neither paroxysms nor abatement. Almost her first coherent words were—

“Ah, Tom, you see he *did* mean it after all.”

It was one of the cruel stabs that the gentlest of God's creatures will deal sometimes, when a great grief has marred and warped their nature. From that moment—albeit there never was coldness or constraint between them—Seyton knew that the unhappy mother would always hold him guilty in her heart of harshness and injustice towards her darling. But that knowledge only made him more sedulous in the filial observance with which he tended her.

Mrs Flemyng never heard of her son's letter to Seyton. She always believed that the verdict of Temporary Insanity was a true one; and that poor Vincent had yielded to the promptings of an over-worked brain—not to any other temptations. Not till long afterwards did Kate learn the whole sinful secret; then her husband told her all that had been said and done on that disastrous day, and confessed his own misgivings as to the share he might innocently have had in hastening the blow that struck poor Marmaduke Dorrillon down. Kate said little, and that

little in tenderness ; but she was almost slower in shaking off the effect of what she then heard, than she had been in recovering from the first horror of her brother's death.

Only by those two women was Vincent Flemyng sincerely and enduringly mourned. Marion Charteris, as has been afore said, was possessed by a vague self-reproach ; but the ominous Shadow receded farther and farther into the back-ground ; till at last it ceased to haunt her sunny life, or, when it glided past at rare intervals, looked less menacing than mournful. Peradventure, even the dark fortress of Flora Dorrillon's heart could not quite keep out remorse ; but against one feeling of grateful tenderness towards the dead it was barred for evermore.

Almost before the turf was laid over Vincent Flemyng's head, all others went about their work or play as if he had never been. Thus it has fared with braver, and wiser, and gentler men ; neither, good Master Lycidas, I fear, will better luck attend your worship, or the humble individual who now addresses you.

How long do you really expect rippling circles will break the smoothness of the stream on which we have been disporting, more or less gracefully, after the last fatal cramp hath seized us, and we shall have gone down into the depths, to sup—let us hope—with Sabrina ?

And now—as cheery old Socrates said to the friends who had borne him company through many pages of ponderous parchment —“ Courage : for I see land a-head.”

When some few more threads are gathered in, the weaver's work will be done ; and the fabric will go forth to be tested by certain cunning chapmen, whom it is not easy to beguile. I suppose the best verdict one ought to expect would be—“a good ‘fast’ colour ; not a very substantial or enduring article, but adapted for summer wear.” As such—and no other—perhaps they will recommend it to their fair and gentle customers.

Yet, of these personages who have figured in this tapestry, little more that is note-worthy is to be recorded.

Brian Maskelyne came back, after long wandering, with the

same moody melancholy on him which he has never entirely shaken off; though he has become less of a recluse of late, and takes his fair share in county-business and field-sports. Nothing would have been easier than to sever himself, by divorce, from the woman who 'laid his honour in the dust.' To the wonder of many, and the scandal of not a few—he has taken no step whatever in this matter. He was also advised to withdraw the large yearly allowance that he had settled on Bessie after their marriage, or to abide a legal decision thereon: but this counsel he rejected very decisively: the only stipulation that he attached to the payment was, that she should cease to bear his name. This condition was very readily accepted by 'Mrs Daventry,' as she chooses to call herself now-a-days.

Various motives have been imputed to Brian, to account for this strange forbearance; and perhaps the chief one he himself would find it hard to define. It may be that, rather than see the base and black treachery paraded again, he prefers to let ill alone. There may also be some vague sense of expiation in all this. You remember that strange fancy of the Fourth James of Scotland; how—in fasting or in feasting; wearing silk or steel; whispering in a lady's ear; or cheering his hounds through the green-wood; or shouting his battle-cry—

Suddenly his look would change,
His cheer o'ercast and lower,
If in a sudden turn he felt
The pressure of his iron belt,
That bound his breast in penance pain
In memory of his father slain.

So Maskelyne may have thought that, in the wearing of those galling fetters, he paid some small part of the debt of retribution, incurred on that night when his mother died—alone.

And even if Bessie's death were to set him free, it would be very long before Brian would venture to ask any pure and faithful woman to fill the place that was voided when the sin of the beautiful traitress found her out.

So Daventry and his paramour live in tolerable comfort, if not credit, on the said allowance, and on their own somewhat pre-

carious gains. They may be encountered at most important race-meetings (the lady makes a very fair book on her own account); and, more constantly still, at such gatherings on the other side of the Channel. For the pair have little honour in their own country; and Continental society suits Bessie, at least, best: she especially affects Baden. She has hitherto been suffered to roam through the Conversation-halls unmolested; though the Administration watch her with a jealous eye; and the slightest overt misdemeanor will bring her under the awful ban of Benazet.

Her familiars, of course, are chiefly found amongst the magnates of the ring; yet others of a higher degree—socially, if not morally, speaking—are often attracted by the splendid insolent beauty which appears even now scarcely to have reached its zenith. It must be owned that these last pay their court—with a reservation. I heard the youthful Marquis of Athelney express a very just opinion on this subject nearly two years ago; and one that was probably shared by many of his fellows.

“She’s a devilish handsome woman,” he said; “and ripping good chaff too, I can tell you. Not half bad fun—to sit with her in the shade and listen to the band. I rather like her to play my money too—she’s better nerve than I have, and better luck—and she’s always welcome to a *rouleau* on her own account. I don’t mind standing supper either, as often as she likes. But, as for her ‘quiet dinners’—not if I know it.”

Therewithal, the beardless but astute aristocrat smote his nose (which he wears large and imposing, as befits a Count of the Holy Roman Empire), with a wink of intense intelligence; and departed, to get his money on Vermout without delay.

Of those same quiet dinners, and the quiet *écarté* ensuing, even that bold and usually fortunate gambler, the Vicomte de St Brélan, has conceived a salutary fear.

“*On m’a plumé, mon ami,*” he averred piteously, whilst recounting the experience of a certain evening—“*plumé, ma parole d’honneur, comme un pauvre chapon de Bresse. J’avais grande envie de dire, avant de partir—‘Madame, votre potage n’était pas mal: mais, je le trouve un peu cher’ Si on me rattrape jamais dans ce guet-à-pens!*”

In truth, wherever that pair may chance to tarry, the cry of

'Ware Hawk!' is very soon raised : they must be conscious of this, and the only wonder is that they carry it off as carelessly. Of the real interior of their *ménage* very little is known ; except that Bessie has never been even suspected of infidelity to her paramour ; and that the latter is supposed to treat her kindly as a rule. Many believe that the balance of power does not now incline to the masculine side ; and that the Lawyer is the more easily cowed of the two. It may well be so : for, the longer they live in close contact the more surely will a dauntless nature assert itself against a craven.

Neither did poor Jem Standen lack care and decent comforts, during the brief remainder of his life ; till one night he fell asleep in his own crapulous fashion, and so passed into the slumber which is frightened by no dreams. But the days of his daughter's mourning lasted not long ; whilst Daventry exulted brutally at being relieved of a cumbersome burden.

Bertie Grenvil still goes gaily and gallantly in front, showing no signs of extraordinary distress, in spite of the terrible severity of the pace. How he and certain of his fellows contrive to ruffle it thus bravely, is a paradox which has puzzled wiser brains than the present writer's.

Some irritated economists are never weary of lifting up their voices in protest against the social anomaly.

"How is it done?"—the sages ask you, querulously. "Where does the mere ready cash come from? Surely there must be an end to this before long?"

But somehow, the end with many of them is not yet.

The great wind coming from the East, that smites the four corners of many houses, in which the wealthy ones of the earth are sitting, sweeps harmlessly over the light and lowly tents wherein these reckless Bedouins dwell : when the commercial horizon is dark with clouds, they seem to be basking in a sunny climate of their own : when tempest walks abroad on the face of the financial waters, they might chant, with the old buccaneer—

O, sweet it was in Avès to catch the landward breeze,
A-swing, with good tobacco, in a hammock 'neath the trees ;
With a negro lass to fan you ; whilst you listened to the roar
Of the breakers on the bar outside, that never reached the shore.

Only the hands that rock these modern marauders to sleep are

lily-white ; and faultless in accent are the voices that sing their lullaby.

Nevertheless, without some extraordinary windfall or stroke of luck should avert it, a reckoning-day must come sooner or later ; and the Cherub's must surely be near at hand. Not only must the patience, both of his creditors and his subsidizing relatives, be nearly worn threadbare, but one or two of his familiar friends have 'gone' lately. We all know what that portends. When a single pilaster is suddenly removed from the fragile edifice, built up of 'mutual-accommodation' paper, the others are ill able to support the slight additional strain ; and the grand final crash becomes the merest question of time. True it is, that for this audacious Skimmer of the Sea (we are on the piratical tack, you see, once more) a harbour of refuge—unless rumour lie—is still open, whereunto he may resort when the cruisers hem him hopelessly in, or when he shall have become weary of roving.

A certain Scottish heiress—the reverse of prepossessing in appearance, but to whom Fortune has made large amends for the niggardliness of Nature—became helplessly enamoured of the Cherub, long long ago : she has been ready ever since to surrender to his keeping, at a moment's notice, herself and her ample tocher ; and, unless Bertie shall step between her and celibacy, for his graceless sake she will live and die a maid. Friends who grieve over her infatuation, cease not to remonstrate ; match-makers, whose own purposes are thwarted thereby, cease not to distil into her ears venomous versions of that reprobate's misdemeanours : all warnings, whether sincere or interested, are treated with the same placid heedlessness. She can even afford to compassionate Bertie's supposed fellow-criminals, on the ground that—"of course they couldn't help themselves, poor things !" Always with the same grateful humility she accepts the cold courtesies and constrained attentions that, at rare intervals, he condescends to bestow upon her. Perhaps, with the patient obstinacy characteristic of her nation, she is content to bide her time, believing that, sooner or later, she will gain the privilege of ministering to her Suzerain's necessities, if to his affections she may never aspire.

Each day that tall and somewhat angular shadow looms larger and nearer across Grenvil's path ; and seems to beckon him

forward into a certain avenue, where the vista is closed by an altar.

The wisest of the Cherub's female advisers—he takes counsel with none others—are beginning to see things in this light, and to lecture their *protégé* accordingly. Before the beginning of next season, the chronicler who has to deal with such matters will “understand that a marriage is on the *tapis*, between a wealthy and accomplished Scotch heiress and a Guardsman well known in fashionable and sporting circles.” I should not wonder if that ingenious but unfortunate gentleman were, for once, right in his surmises.

Should such be the case, putting Mrs Malaprop's grand principle aside—the union will probably be better regulated than most alliances purely conventional on one side. The bride will certainly not be jealous or exacting, and Bertie is simply incapable of maltreating any woman whatsoever; so that in that household a kindly courtesy may well prevail, even if it should never ripen into domestic happiness. But these things are all of the future, and matters of merest augury.

Neither in Marlshire, or on its borders, is there any startling change. The feminine feud betwixt the houses of Brancepeth and Peverell has gone smouldering on, giving out angry flashes at intervals, but never absolutely bursting into flame. But the influence of the latter family is sensibly abated in the county; and it is gravely doubted whether, at the next elections, the unpopularity of his wife and son may not be too much weight for Sir Pierce to carry, despite his long and faithful service to the shire. Some vague rumours of such opposition and revolt are supposed to have reached Lady Peverell's ears, and to have chafed her haughty spirit sorely; for her temper has shown itself terribly often of late, and she watches for cause of offence more jealously than ever. But none the less hardily does La Reine Gaillarde—aided and abetted by her laughter-loving lieges—make a mock at the grim castellaine of La Garde Douleureuse.

At Warleigh, too, there is still sunshine, as of old, albeit tempered with some light shadows. For Mrs Flemyng is much there; and in that sad presence, even the children (whom she dotes on, and who are ridiculously fond of her) refrain instinctively

from noisy mirth. But the elder ones know that they are never to mention 'poor uncle Vincent's name;' and the younger will, perhaps, never hear it. The bereaved mother knows that she alone now clings to that memory, as if it were a holy thing; but not for this does any bitterness mingle with her grief. She is content to hear Kate 'lilting' about the house merrily as of old; and she does not begrudge Tom one of his honest pleasures; for she knows that neither of those two would have grudged any possible cost, or trouble, or pain, to have averted calamity from her dead darling's head; and she quarrels no more with their recovered spirits than with their doffing of the mourning, which she herself will change only for her shroud.

Warleigh is a name of more mark now-a-days than when this tale began. Last year Frank Braybroke, after many grumbings and misgivings, did positively and finally decide that he was getting too old and heavy for his post. When this determination was found to be unalterable, Marlshire lost no time in looking out for a worthy successor; and the eyes of the whole county turned, as the eyes of one man, towards Seyton.

Tom made some objections at first—"he was a family man, and a farmer to boot; couldn't afford the time, or the money," &c., &c. And Kate shook her pretty head, warningly: but the reluctance of the one and the prudence of the other were the most transparent matters of form. While the mock-debate was in progress, Brian Maskelyne appeared, and all financial scruples vanished before the magnificent subscription—or rather guarantee—that he proffered.

"I'd give more than that to make you take the hounds, Tom," he said. "I think, I *should* have some interest in them, then. And my nerve's coming back, I do believe."

That clenched the question, at once—not that it needed much clenching; and the mastership of the M. H. was virtually transferred that very day. They gave dear Frank Braybroke (he abdicated the Squiredom with his other honours) a tremendous dinner; and a colossal piece of plate, under which he sits, on state occasions, like a man under his own vine or fig-tree. When the cloth was removed, and the stock-toasts had been got through, Mr Braybroke delivered the longest and most ornate oration of his

life; at the conclusion of which he endowed Seyton with his horn and his blessing.

Both of these gifts have thriven remarkably well with Tom, hitherto; and perhaps, it will not be long before, in the glories of the new Mastership, men forget even the famous Pinkerton run above recorded.

It is rumoured that the Little Lady means to visit Marlshire once again before the violets are in bloom; so that buxom Bell Gaysforde will have another chance of proving if she can give all that weight away.

And the bonniest of Kates pursues more sedulously than ever—"by virtue of her position"—she says. But she pursues not alone. For, be the weather fair or foul, there rides always at her side a sturdy fair-haired little page; "the very moral of his father (all Marlshire avers); and with just Tom's seat;" who was 'blooded' this season, after the first kill in the open.

Over the banquets at Charteris Royal—radiant in beauty and in royalty of apparel—the Fiametta still presides. She has not entirely lost the frank audacity and merry wilfulness which were ever amongst her chiefest charms. She will flirt—as Flora Dorrillon said—"to-morrow, and next day, and to the very end of her time." But her coquetries are tempered, now, by a certain discretion and reserve; she never again will flutter so near to flame as to risk the singeing or smirching of her brilliant wings. Besides, she has become, of late, very fond of her eldest-born—a handsome, graceful boy—who, morally not less than physically, takes after his impulsive mother, rather than his stolidly respectable sire. John Charteris plods on his decent blameless way, with the placid contentment and self-satisfaction of one over whose head a great peril has passed, unawares. But the match-making cousin, to whom Marion owed her matrimonial promotion, finds an intense relief in the improved state of things: the good lady had occasionally been tormented with fearful misgivings as to the wisdom of her choice: now she points to the results thereof with a pardonable pride.

Of Blanche Ellerslie there is nothing further, at present, to tell. The proceedings of that dangerously discreet little person never did make much noise in the world; but from marauders of her stamp, no news are often bad news; so that it is probable

we shall hear, ere long, of further damage done within bow-shot of her modest dwelling.

Lastly : how fares it with *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* ?

In truth, that question may not easily be answered. She has withdrawn herself almost entirely from general society, of late ; and people have grown tired of assigning reasons for this seclusion. Assuredly, it is not that she shrinks from encountering the scandal she provoked ; for Flora's bitterest enemies can only call her—over-bold. The weary disgust, and satiety of triumph, which has caused some of the most ruthlessly ambitious of human kind to lay down an ill-gotten sceptre, and pass away into obscure abdication, may have something to do with it. Also it is not impossible that the remorseful terror which overcame her, when she saw her husband paralysed at her feet, may abide with her yet. Certain it is, that since that fatal day she has done much to make up her long arrears of wifely duty.

All her care and tendance are greatly needed ; for, though Sir Marmaduke has recovered, beyond the expectations of his most sanguine physician, he is still—and must ever be—a mere moral and physical wreck. The words that burst from his lips in the frenzy of jealous passion were dreadfully prophetic : they *were* the last he ever did speak—intelligibly. Yet, in spite of his infirmity, the old man is probably happier than he has been since his unlucky marriage. He is never querulous or irritable, whilst his eyes can rest upon Flora ; when she arranges his cushions, or performs any other trifling kindly office, you may see a faint light of grateful pleasure dawn on the poor stricken face ; and now and then he will venture to raise her fingers to his lips (only one hand is quite helpless) with something of his ancient courtly air.

But—supposing that Flora is moved, now, by a real remorse—a remorse that will outlast the precarious life that she helps to prolong—will it so far avail as to bring peace at the last ? There is no question of theology here. I simply doubt, whether late and half-enforced repentance can ever, in this world of ours, so atone for long misdoing, as to appease an awakened conscience.

Do you remember some of the noblest lines in that master piece of verse, that ought to be set in the balance against the many poetical sins of this our age ?

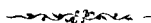
They tell, how Guinevere looked forth through the convent casement, to gain one last glimpse of the generous husband who had just shriven and forgiven her. There, below in the court, he sat on his war-horse, amidst the nuns.

And while he spake to these his helm was lowered,
To which for crest the golden dragon clung
Of Britain; so she did not see the face
Which then was as an angel's; but she saw,
Wet with the mists and smitten by the lights,
The Dragon of the great Pendragonship
Blaze, making all the night a steam of fire.

Ah me! I wonder how many penitents, since that fairest one of all, looking forth into the dark misty future, have seen—not the kind forgiving face—but only the crest of The Serpent?

THE END.

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*When all the World is Young	Words by	REV. CHARLES KINGSLEY.
*'Tis all that I can say	„	THOMAS HOOD.
The Midnight Wind	„	MOTHERWELL.
I strike the Chords	„	ERICA.
The Night is wild	„	ELIZABETH PHILP.
*Gathered Treasures	„	TOM HOOD.
I once had a sweet little doll	„	REV. CHARLES KINGSLEY.
Cupid's Song	„	VERITAS.
*Ouvanc's Silent Shore	„	ELIZABETH PHILP.
*The River ran between them	„	J. S. LE FANU.
*My Head is like to Rend	„	MOTHERWELL.
*The Irish King's Ride	„	ANON.
*The Poacher's Widow	„	REV. CHARLES KINGSLEY.
*Sitting lonely, ever lonely	„	AMELIA B. EDWARDS.
Nanon (Romance Française)	„	ALFRED DE MUSSET.
Le Chant Des Lavandières	„	VICTOR HUGO.
Tell me, the Summer Stars	„	EDWIN ARNOLD.
What is Love ?	„	AN OLD POET.
One little Year ago	„	FANNY KEMBLE.
O think not that I can forget thee	„	B. S. MONTGOMERY.
Lament not	„	EMILY HAM.
The Sea hath its Pearls	„	LONGFELLOW
Oh Moonlight Deep and Tender	„	LOWELL.
From the close-shut Window	„	Do.
The Soul, and the Sea	„	EMILY HAM.
Good Night, Beloved !	„	LONGFELLOW.
It was the time of Roses (Duet)	„	THOMAS HOOD.
Insufficiency	„	ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.
Inclusions	„	Do.
Clear and Cool (The Song of the River)	„	REV. CHARLES KINGSLEY.

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* *These Songs are published by Messrs. Boosey.*

(Turn over.)

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